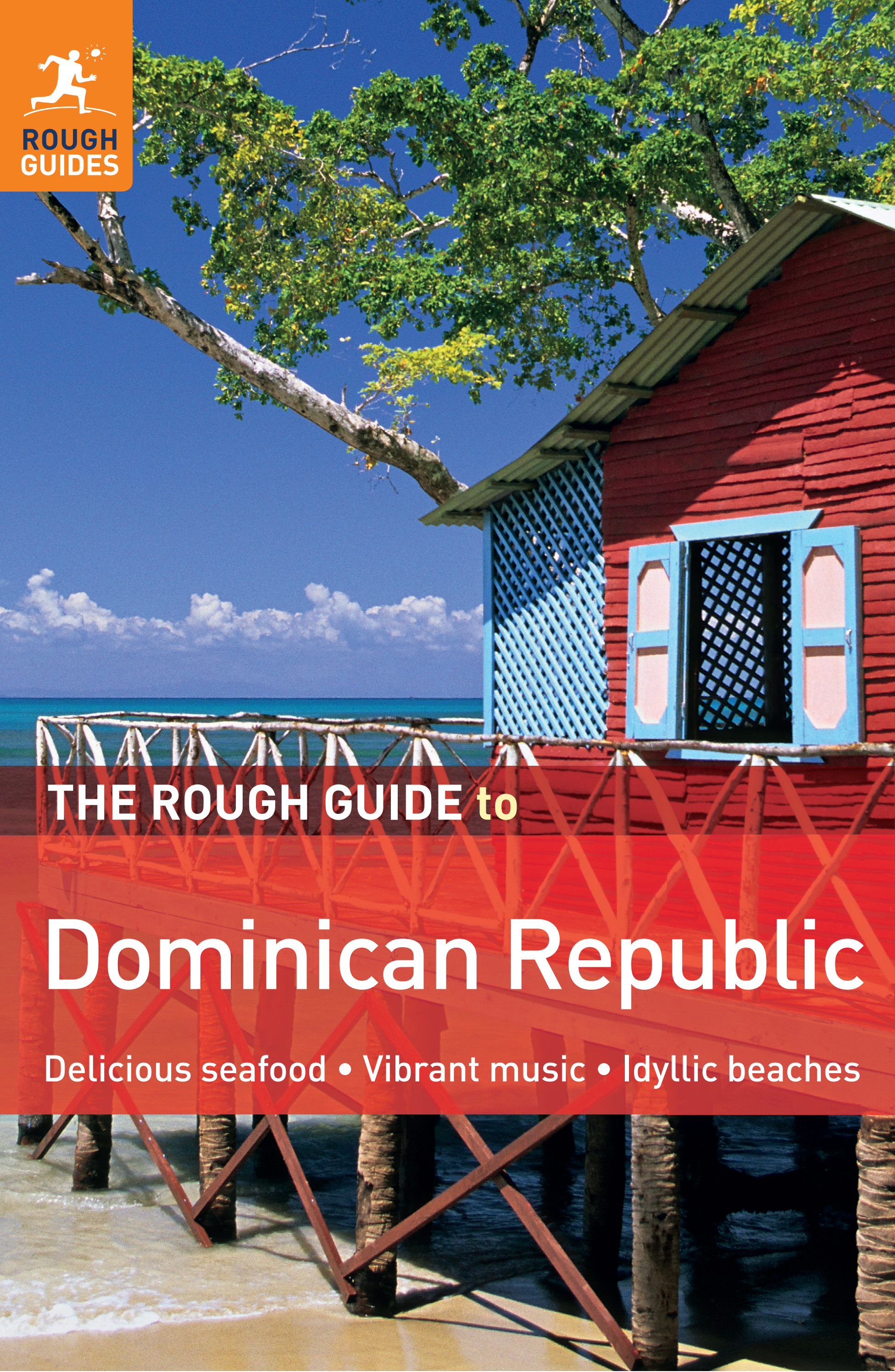
ROUGH GUIDES



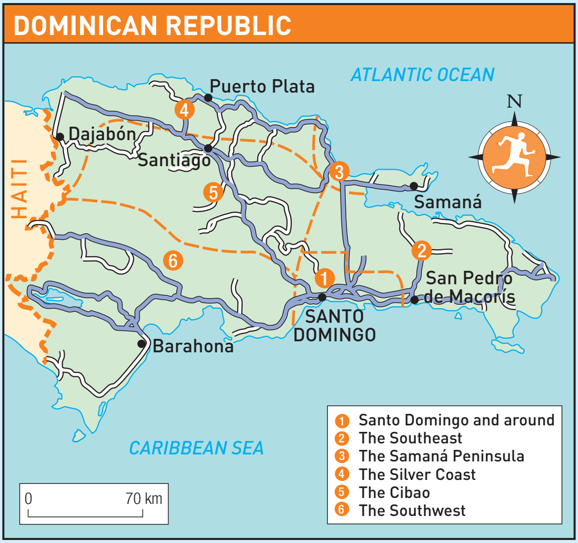
THE ROUGH GUIDE to

Dominican Republic

Delicious seafood • Vibrant music • Idyllic beaches

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM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1 Santo Domingo and around
2 The Southeast
3 The Samaná Peninsula
4 The Silver Coast
5 The Cibao
6 The Southwest

About this book

Rough Guides are designed to be good to read and easy to use. The book is divided into the following sections, and you should be able to find whatever you need in one of them.

The introductory **colour section** is designed to give you a feel for the Dominican Republic, suggesting when to go and what not to miss, and includes a full list of **contents**. Then comes **basics**, for pre-departure information and other practicalities.

The **guide** chapters cover the Dominican Republic in depth, each starting with a highlights panel, introduction and a map to help you plan your route.

Contexts fills you in on history, wildlife, music and literature, while **language** gives you an extensive menu reader and enough Spanish to get by.

The book concludes with all the **small print**, including details of how to send in updates and corrections, and a comprehensive **index**.

This fifth edition published October 2011.

The publishers and authors have done their best to ensure the accuracy and currency of all the information in *The Rough Guide to The Dominican Republic*, however, they can accept no responsibility for any loss, injury, or inconvenience sustained by any traveller as a result of information or advice contained in the guide.

The **Rough Guide** to

The Dominican Republic

written and researched by

Sean Harvey

with additional contributions from

Sara Humphreys

www.roughguides.com

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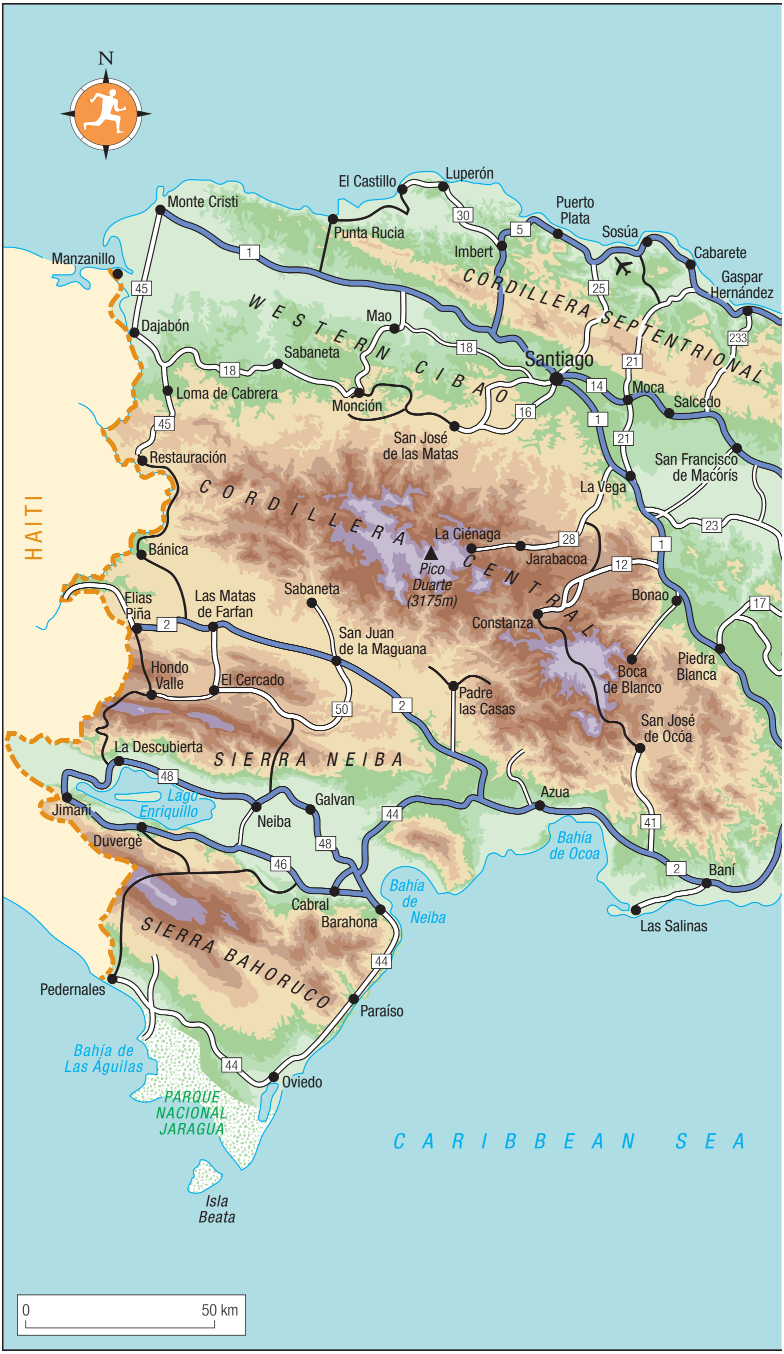
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Padre las Casas
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La Descubierta
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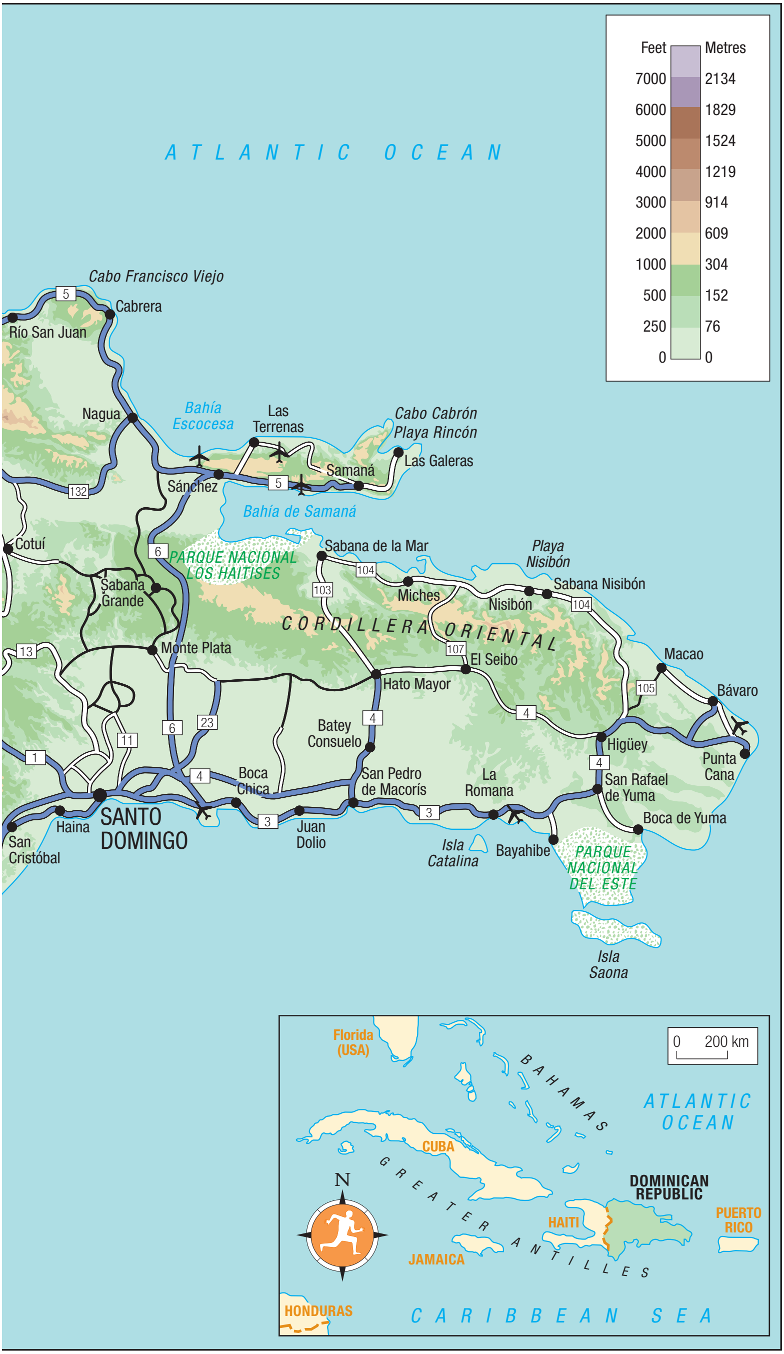
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HAITI
PUERTO RICO
JAMAICA
HONDURAS
CARIBBEAN SEA

Introduction to The Dominican Republic

Occupying the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic is the most visited tourist destination in the Caribbean. And the country's image as a sun-blessed playground is merited – you can happily spend your days on sandy beaches framed by crystal-clear waters and lofty palm trees, and fill your nights with merengue and dark rum.

But there's a lot more to the DR, as it's commonly known. Set on the most geographically diverse Caribbean island, it boasts alpine wilderness, tropical rainforests and mangrove swamps, cultivated savannahs, vast desert expanses and everything in between. The opportunities for **ecotourism** and adventure travel are staggering: if you were so inclined, in a single week you could scale a 150m **waterfall** on a rope, mountain bike along remote dirt tracks, ride the best windsurfing waves in the hemisphere, trek to the top of a 3000m mountain and head out in a fishing boat to marvel at the **humpback whales** crashing about in the bay of Samaná.

As Dominicans are quick to point out, their land was the setting for Christopher Columbus's first colony, La Isabela, and Spain's first New World city, **Santo Domingo**. The events that took place during this brief heyday did much to define the Americas as we know them, and examples of period architecture – both preserved and in ruins – remain in the colonial heart of Santo Domingo. As for Dominican culture today, locals take great pride in the sophisticated and intoxicating rhythms of **merengue** and **bachata** – the national musical forms – and in the exploits of homegrown baseball players who become stars in the North American leagues.

Religion, too, is an integral part of life. The roots of **syncretic religion** (see p.68) are complicated and nuanced but its theatrical side can be experienced firsthand at one of the dozens of vibrant **fiestas patronales**. Held in every town across the country, the celebrations in the name of a patron saint are usually music-driven, round-the-clock processions and street parties that can last several days, and offering visitors another chance to see the DR in full, passionate swing.

Where to go

Many visitors head directly for beachfront resorts, and there's much at these vacation retreats to admire. The southeastern part of the country probably has the loveliest all-inclusive resort zones, **Bávaro** and **Punta Cana**, both holding pristine coastline stretching for kilometres on end. Also dedicated to mass tourism is the mega-complex Playa Dorada on the north coast. **Playa Dorada** is set beside the city of Puerto Plata, a historic city worth examining for its wealth of Victorian architecture, and is also in easy proximity to wind- and kitesurfing capital **Cabarete**.

Of course, you don't have to base yourself in a resort to visit the DR's most popular sights, and there are plenty of opportunities for independent

▶ Beach in Bayahibe

travellers to range further afield too. A quest for **immaculate beaches** may take you to the most remote corners of the southwest, where your efforts will be rewarded with the breathtaking sands of the Jaragua Peninsula. There are some beautiful, and far more accessible, beaches scattered about the **Samaná Peninsula**, however, poking out at the country's extreme northeast. Its primary city, Samaná, serves as a base for checking out the **humpback whales** that migrate to the Bahía de Samaná each winter, while **Las Terrenas** is the peninsula's liveliest town. Its long, sandy seafront is lined with expat-owned hotels, tour operators, and popular restaurants and bars, while secluded paradise isn't far away at the beaches of **playas Bonita** and **Rincón**.

On the southern coast the capital city, **Santo Domingo**, offers the most fulfilling urban experience, and should be on everyone's itinerary and not just because it has the country's largest airport – historic forts, churches and the elegant homes of the **Zona Colonial** make it a fascinating destination in its own right.

If you're seeking a bit more **adventure** and outdoor life, you needn't look too hard. The Cordillera Central is the island's largest mountain range and provides the stunning setting for multi-day treks through the wilderness to the top of **Pico Duarte** – the tallest peak in the Antilles – and trips to Jarabacoa, a resort town blessed with a cluster of four waterfalls in its immediate vicinity and featuring all manner of mountain sports.

◀ Boat in the mangroves, Playa Rincón

▶ The Zona Colonial

When to go

There are two distinct tourist **high seasons** in the Dominican Republic, the summer months of July and August, when travellers from the northern hemisphere fill the resorts and all but the most out-of-the-way beaches, and the winter season between December and late February, when the Dominican climate is at its optimum, having cooled down a little from the summer. You'll therefore save a bit of money – and have an easier time booking a hotel room on the spot – if you arrive during the spring or the autumn, which is just fine, as the **temperature** doesn't really vary all that much from season to season.

Keep in mind also that the Dominican Republic is in the centre of the Caribbean **hurricane** belt, and gets hit with a major storm every decade or so. August and September is prime hurricane season, though smaller ones can occur in the months before and after.

Average temperatures and rainfall

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Avg temp °F	75	75	76	78	79	81	81	82	81	80	78	76
Avg temp °C	24	24	25	26	26	27	27	28	27	27	26	25
rainfall (mm)	191	154	123	151	131	61	72	85	92	132	293	274

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things not to miss

It's not possible to see everything the Dominican Republic has to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows is a selective and subjective taste of the country's highlights: gorgeous beaches, colonial relics, outdoor activities and lively festivals. They're arranged in five colour-coded categories so you can find the very best things to see, do, eat and experience. All highlights have a page reference to take you straight into the text, where you can find out more.

01 **Playa Rincón** Page **144** • Simply the country's finest beach, where you can relax beneath palm trees, swim in turquoise waters and enjoy freshly caught fish grilled at a waterside shack.

02 **Cuban son** Page **80** • *Buena Vista Social Club*-style son clubs are prolific in Santo Domingo.

03 **Whitewater rafting** Page **232** • An adrenaline-fuelled adventure and a great way to see the country's more remote mountain scenery.

04 **El Limón waterfall** Page **155** • Hidden deep within the Samaná mountains, but accessible on horseback, this pristine 150m waterfall is one of the loveliest spots on the island.

05 **Constanza** Page **238** • A circular Shangri-la valley set deep in the heart of the Caribbean's tallest mountains.

06 **Cabarete** Page **185** • This lively beach town boasts the best windsurfing and kitesurfing in the Caribbean.

07 **Santo Domingo Malecón** Page **68** • A scenic, 10km-long outdoor boardwalk and party zone dotted with music-blaring discos and bustling bars and cafés.

08 **Amber** Page **60** • Unbeatable as an authentic, locally produced souvenir, this semiprecious stone is stunning when set in jewellery.

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09 **Baseball** Page **299** • See the best young players in the world before they're whisked off to the US to make it big.

10 Lago Enriquillo Page **267** • A saltwater lake the size of Manhattan, populated by crocodiles, rhinoceros, iguanas and tens of thousands of colourful tropical birds.

11 Museo del Hombre Dominicano, Santo Domingo Page **71** • This impressive museum, one of four in Santo Domingo's Plaza de la Cultura, houses an outstanding collection of Taino artefacts, plus exhibits on the island's African heritage.

12 Mountain biking in Cordillera Septentrional Page **232** • Choose from all-day downhill rides to multi-day treks for experts, with stunning mountain scenery as your backdrop.

13 **La Vega Carnival** Page **229** • Each February, La Vega transforms itself with the biggest, wildest party in this Carnival-crazed nation.

14 Merengue dancing Page **291** • The stuttering, fast-paced national music has been around in various forms for the past three hundred years.

15 Zona Colonial Page **58** • Santo Domingo's compact treasure-trove of colonial architecture.

16 Whale watching Page **139** • One of the world's great natural spectacles takes place every winter in Samaná bay when thousands of humpback whales arrive to breed, give birth and fill the memory cards of the watching tourists' cameras.

Basics

Basics

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Getting there

The Dominican Republic is well connected to the outside world and you'll find a plethora of flight options from North America and Europe. The primary points of entry into the country by air are Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata and Punta Cana, with additional international airports at Santiago and Samaná.

When travelling to the Dominican Republic, it's often cheaper to come via a **charter flight**. Most of these are a result of the huge all-inclusive tourism industry built up along Dominican shores; package deals for airfare, hotel and food abound, with astounding rates available to those willing to shop around. But even if you don't want to go all-inclusive, the air charters that transfer package tourists to their all-inclusive destinations regularly offer extra seats to independent travellers for a surprisingly low price. Those headed here from South Africa will find fewer bargains, but with a bit of stamina you can make your way to the DR via the major airlines, though you won't be able to avoid a transfer at some point along the way.

Flights from the US and Canada

There are **flights** to the Dominican Republic from most major Canadian and US cities (some west-coast connections require an overnight stay in Miami or New York), but the cheapest and most frequent depart from the "gateway" cities of Miami, New York, Montréal and Toronto. The budget airline JetBlue offers cheap flights from North America to Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata and Santiago. All flights go through New York City, requiring a transfer here if coming from elsewhere on the continent.

A number of companies offer good-value **package tours** to Dominican resorts, usually for one or two weeks. Packages are generally only available to the more commercialized destinations, such as Puerto Plata, Sosúa and Cabarete in the north and Boca Chica, Juan Dolio and Punta Cana/Bávaro in the south. In the US, package tour operators usually operate out of a particular city and can't book connecting flights from elsewhere; one operator, Inter-Island (see p.21), books flights with American Airlines and can get you to the DR from any major city in the US, though their prices are a bit higher. In Canada, Dominican packages are serviced by a number of giant travel "wholesalers" and charter airlines which don't deal directly with the public; if you want to book one of their packages, you'll have to go through a local travel agent.

Flights from the UK and Ireland

British Airways runs twice-weekly direct flights from London to Punta Cana; they currently fly on Thursdays and Sundays in both directions and cost £300–400 year-round. You can also leverage BA to get to Puerto Plata and Santo Domingo, with a stop-off in Miami and a connecting flight through their partner American Airlines.

Alternatively, there are a number of charter flights that fly direct to Punta Cana or Puerto Plata from London Gatwick and Birmingham; these are typically offered in conjunction with all-inclusive hotel stays, but you can also book empty seats on these at one of several charter flight wholesaler websites. All scheduled services to the Dominican Republic run daily from both **Heathrow** and **Gatwick**; Punta Cana trips typically fly via Paris, with Puerto Plata flights stopping off in New York.

Flights from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

The Caribbean is not a bargain destination from **Australia** or **New Zealand**. Because there are **no direct flights** to the Dominican Republic, you'll need to travel first to the US or Europe. It's a day-long slog whichever

Six steps to a better kind of travel

At Rough Guides we are passionately committed to travel. We feel strongly that only through travelling do we truly come to understand the world we live in and the people we share it with – plus tourism has brought a great deal of **benefit** to developing economies around the world over the last few decades. But the extraordinary growth in tourism has also damaged some places irreparably, and of course **climate change** is exacerbated by most forms of transport, especially flying. This means that now more than ever it's important to **travel thoughtfully** and **responsibly**, with respect for the cultures you're visiting – not only to derive the most benefit from your trip but also to preserve the best bits of the planet for everyone to enjoy. At Rough Guides we feel there are six main areas in which you can make a difference:

- Consider what you're contributing to the **local economy**, and how much the services you use do the same, whether it's through employing local workers and guides or sourcing locally grown produce and local services.
- Consider the **environment** on holiday as well as at home. Water is scarce in many developing destinations, and the biodiversity of local flora and fauna can be adversely affected by tourism. Try to patronize businesses that take account of this.
- Travel with a purpose, not just to tick off experiences. Consider **spending longer** in a place, and getting to know it and its people.
- Give thought to how often you **fly**. Try to avoid short hops by air and more harmful night flights.
- Consider **alternatives to flying**, travelling instead by bus, train, boat and even by bike or on foot where possible.
- Make your trips "**climate neutral**" via a reputable carbon offset scheme. All Rough Guide flights are offset, and every year we donate money to a variety of charities devoted to combating the effects of climate change.

way you go, but most convenient **from Australia** is a non stop from Sydney to New York City via Qantas, American or United, followed by an onward connection to the DR via one of the North American airlines listed below. **From New Zealand** you can take a direct flight from Auckland to New York with a stop in Los Angeles and get an onward connection from there.

Travellers from South Africa can get to Santo Domingo via Iberia airlines, though stops at Madrid and/or London are involved, and to Puerto Plata and Punta Cana via British Airways with stops in London and/or Miami.

Airlines, agents and operators

Airlines

Air New Zealand ⓦwww.airnz.com.
American Airlines ⓦwww.aa.com.
Continental Airlines ⓦwww.continental.com.
Delta ⓦwww.delta.com.
Iberia ⓦwww.iberia.com.
JetBlue ⓦwww.jetblue.com.
Qantas Airways ⓦwww.qantas.com.
United Airlines ⓦwww.united.com.
US Airways ⓦwww.usair.com.
USA 3000 Airlines ⓦwww.usa3000airlines.com.

Agents and operators

Apple Vacations ⓦwww.applevacations.com. Online package-holiday company with all-inclusive trips from most of the US to Juan Dolio, Puerto Plata, Punta Cana, La Romana and Luperón.

Aquatic Adventures ⓣ305/827-0211, ⓦwww.aquaticadventures.com. Texas-based outfit that offers US$2900 week-long whale-watching cruises in the Silver Banks Sanctuary, departing from Puerto Plata.

ebookers UK ⓣ0800/082 3000; ⓦwww.ebookers.com Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/488 3507, ⓦwww.ebookers.ie. Low fares on an extensive selection of scheduled flights and package deals.

Iguana Mama Ⓣ1-800/849-4720, Ⓦwww.iguanamama.com. Full-service adventure tour operator offering good-value packages on flight, accommodation, various water-and adventure sports and food. Possible activities include windsurfing, mountain biking, mountain treks and excursions on horseback.

Inter-Island Tours Ⓣ1-800/915-2322, Ⓦwww.cheapcaribbean.com. All-inclusive North America package holidays using American Airlines instead of the charter flight operators. Trips are slightly more expensive as a result, averaging around US$1000–1350.

STA Travel US Ⓣ1-800/781-4040, UK Ⓣ0871/230 0040, Australia Ⓣ134 STA, New Zealand Ⓣ0800/474 400, SA Ⓣ0861/781 781; Ⓦwww.statravel.com. Worldwide specialists in independent travel; also student IDs, travel insurance, car rental, rail passes and more. Good discounts for students and under-26s.

Sunquest Ⓣ1-877/485-6060, Ⓦwww.sunquestvacations.ca. All-inclusive holidays to Punta Cana, Puerto Plata, Boca Chica and Bayahibe from Toronto and Ottawa, with connections from all major Canadian cities.

Tours, Trips, Treks & Travel Ⓣ585/248-9299, Ⓦwww.4tdomrep.com. First-class tour operator focusing on combination culture tours and adventure trips across the island.

Trailfinders UK Ⓣ0845/058 5858, Republic of Ireland Ⓣ01/677 7888, Australia Ⓣ1300/780 212; Ⓦwww.trailfinders.com. One of the best-informed and most efficient agents for independent travellers.

Getting around

The Dominican Republic's bus companies provide an excellent, inexpensive service over much of the country. Lines at the stations move quickly, there's plenty of room for luggage on the vehicles and – aside from the quality of the movies screened on cross-country rides – trips are relatively pleasant and hassle-free. Even more extensive and cheap is the informal network of guaguas, ranging from fairly decent minibuses to battered vans, that cover every inch of the DR; in most cases, you should be prepared for some discomfort – and you'll have a hard time fitting in much luggage, as every square inch of space is packed with passengers. Within towns there's usually a reliable formal 24-hour taxi service that you can call for pick-up as well, though they typically cost a bit more. Rates are typically set but there's no meter; only rarely will anyone try to rip you off but it's still good to set a price before you start.

Car rental affords a freedom you'll greatly appreciate after a few days going from town to town on the guaguas, but the cost is generally high, due to petrol prices, import duties and high accident rates. **Domestic airlines**, on the other hand, are a reasonably economical option if you're not exploring much beyond the main centres. Finally, a number of **tour operators** in Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata and the all-inclusive resorts organize individual itineraries and packages with transport included.

Buses

Santo Domingo and Santiago are the major hubs for **bus travel** and some companies do little more than shuttle between the two. You generally have to buy your ticket the day you travel, though **Caribe Tours** allows you to reserve online, provided you confirm two hours before departure. Caribe Tours (Ⓣ221-4422, Ⓦwww.caribetours.com.do) boasts by far the most extensive network of bus lines – with connections to the Cibao, the Samaná

Peninsula, the Barahona region, the entire Silver Coast and even Port-au-Prince, Haiti – while **Metro** (☎566-7126, Ⓦwww.metroserviciosturisticos.com) can get you from the capital to the Cibao, Puerto Plata and the Samaná Peninsula. Both of these companies have comprehensive brochures available in their stations, listing destinations and departure times.

In addition to these two, you'll find several regional bus companies that cover one particular part of the country, though vehicles and drivers tend to vary more in quality; negotiating the regional connections is detailed throughout the guide. Unless it's a public holiday, you won't need **advance reservations**, but you should arrive at least an hour before the bus leaves to be sure of getting a seat.

The bus companies strive to stay in competition with guaguas and so **fares** are extremely cheap. Even a cross-country trip from Santo Domingo to Sosúa will set you back no more than RD$350, while shorter trips fall in the RD$150 range. Make sure that the date and time are correct on your ticket; even if the mistake isn't yours, you cannot normally change your ticket or get a refund. All Dominican buses have toilets in the back and on trips of more than two hours, a rest stop will be taken at a roadside restaurant or service station.

Guaguas, públicos and motoconchos

The Dominican Republic's informal system of **guaguas**, an unregulated nationwide network of private operators, is a distinctive experience that you should try at least once. An instant bond of familiarity is formed as passengers – mostly locals – are crammed four and five to a seat in these half-wrecked vans that often seem held together with little more than packing tape and a strategically placed bit of rope: Amway salespeople pester fellow passengers, Pentecostals proselytize to heathens, a bottle of rum is passed around and – on night runs when the guaguas are less crowded – somebody pulls out a guitar and everyone breaks into song. Aside from the local colour they provide, they're worth using for the cheap fares and comprehensive coverage to all parts of the country. Guaguas are operated by teams of two, the driver and the *cobrador*, who sticks his head out of the sliding side door (assuming it hasn't been torn off) and drums up business. If you want to catch one, just stand by the side of the road and wave your arms at one as it passes.

You'll find a higher volume of guagua traffic in the morning, but there's a limited overnight service as well. Guaguas are incredibly cheap; in the southeast and other parts of the country not serviced by Caribe Tours and Metro, they're your best option for public transport. That said, most guaguas are a bit cramped and you shouldn't expect to hear much, if any, English spoken. Often the destination will be emblazoned on the side, but always ask before you hop aboard.

For longer trips, you'll often have to change guaguas at major towns, but even the longest leg of the trip will cost no more than RD$100; more often, you'll be paying RD$50–60. Be aware, though, that attempted **rip-offs** of tourists are not unheard of. You should ask around and find out how much a given guagua ride costs before flagging one down. Don't ask the driver or you may be quoted a rate ten times higher than the norm; instead, clamber into the vehicle and hand over your money immediately without saying a word. If the *cobrador* won't take the money, get out and wait for the next. Keep a careful eye on the road as you go; you'll have to shout for the driver to pull over when you want to get out: even if you ask them to alert you at your stop, they sometimes forget.

Though vans are the most prevalent type of guagua, there are other manifestations as well, such as pick-up trucks; routes leading from Santo Domingo to the southeast and the Barahona region are often served by far more comfortable, air-conditioned minibuses.

Along the Silver Coast, the vans are augmented by private cars called **públicos**, which charge around RD$40–50 and only go to the next nearest town and wait to fill up before heading off. *Públicos* also make up part of the city transport system in Santo Domingo and dominate it in Santiago. City routes rarely cost more than RD$20, though you'll have to put up with blaring music and some daredevil driving manoeuvres. In Puerto Plata and other, smaller, towns, city transport is instead in the form of **motoconchos**, inexpensive, small-engine motorbikes that ferry you from place to place; they're faster than the *públicos* but can be dangerous.

Driving

Car rental is expensive in the DR, though you can cut your costs a bit – and avoid a lot of hassle – by booking in advance with one of the international operators listed on p.24; Dollar and National are generally the best value and both offer decent 4WDs. Recognized international firms, along with reputable Dominican agency Nelly, are preferable as they're no more expensive, have branches at the airport and are far less likely to rip you off; if you don't have a credit card, though, you'll be stuck with the local companies, who accept passports in lieu of a security deposit. Take extra care in documenting any pre-existing damage to the car at the outset.

Rates start at around US$60 per day, with unlimited mileage but no discount for longer rental periods; you should also get full collision insurance. Even with collision, though, you're contractually responsible for any damage up to RD$25,000. You should therefore take special care to note *all* dents, scratches and missing parts before signing off; nor should you sign the contract if a total price, including all hidden charges, taxes and fees, is not filled out. Anticipate high **petrol** costs, which float around RD$200 per gallon. Most petrol stations close around 8pm – and there are none whatsoever in the most remote regions – so keep a careful eye on your tank. If all else fails, look for one of the many roadside tables that sell individual litres of petrol for around RD$100.

Rental firms here charge exorbitant rates for **repairs**; if your car is dented you're far better off going to one of the local mechanics, who will charge at most RD$300 (as opposed to as much as RD$25,000). Because of the poor quality of many roads, flat tyres are a common occurrence; fortunately, every town has at least one *gomero*, independent tyre shops that work miracles for as little as RD$50.

Car rental is the most convenient travel option if you're going from town to town across the island, but driving through the congested, unregulated streets of Dominican cities is often more trouble than it's worth. If you want to explore the beautiful coastal and mountain back-roads – which give access to the DR's finest scenery – you're best off renting a good **four-wheel-drive**, which costs from US$100 per day. Rental firms may try to entice you into choosing the cheaper Suzukis, which are the same price as standard cars, but these aren't really intended for rough mountain travel and after the first bone-wrenching hour along a Dominican dirt road, you'll curse yourself for not spending more.

Motorcycles can also be rented at many local firms, for around US$40 per day. Be

Crossing the Haitian border

Due to the political instability and the aftermath of the devastating **earthquake in 2010**, crossing the Haitian border from the Dominican Republic was inadvisable at the time of this book's publication. Technically, there are two legal border crossings: Ouanaminthe–Dajabón or Malpasse–Jimaní, both of them open daily from 8am to 6pm, but you should only cross with one of the major bus companies, which both use the Jimaní crossing. Terrabus (☎531-0383 in Santo Domingo) is a very efficient company with comfortable buses that run a daily route from Port-au-Prince to Santo Domingo via the border crossing at Jimaní, while Caribe Tours (☎221-4422) offers trips to the Haitian capital that depart Santo Domingo daily at 11am. No one is allowed to bring a rental car across the Haitian–Dominican border, so unless you own a car in the DR, you won't be able to drive into Haiti or vice versa. Otherwise you'll be stuck with the often bizarre Haitian modes of public transport; among the most popular are school buses with their front end chopped off, soldered onto a Mack truck cab – and with the eardrum-pulverizing horn pointed directly at passengers.

warned, though: motorbike thefts are extremely common, especially in resort areas, so you'll have to keep it locked up when you're not riding it. A motorcycle helmet law was enacted several years ago, but it's rarely adhered to and laughable local attempts to comply generally utilize baseball batting helmets or plastic toy American football gear intended for children. That doesn't mean that you should follow suit; insist that a proper helmet comes with your bike.

Road rules

Dominicans drive on the **right-hand side of the road**, often at a breakneck pace. You'll have to keep a careful eye out along the highways, as large commercial buses and cargo trucks constantly veer into the opposite lane to pass slower vehicles. An array of signals using the car horns and lights are used by local motorists, though most of the time their meaning is obscure; a driver about to pass you will often blink the headlights, while one coming towards you doing this is signalling that he or she is in your lane.

You'll also find a bewildering variety of **obstacles** in your path, including turtle-paced ice-cream trucks, *motoconchos* with comical cargoes of piled chicken coops or construction equipment (which the driver holds down with one arm) and children running back and forth along the freeway. As you approach towns, watch out for the nasty **speed bumps**, originally intended to prevent accidents but now used by local police to slow passing cars enough that RD$5 **bribes** can be exacted from them.

Bribe-taking is the primary concern of law enforcement officers posted along the roads, who don't have enough money for police cars; if they don't actually jump out in front of your car, you should do as the Dominicans do and drive past them without slowing down. Otherwise, pretend to speak no Spanish and keep repeating the word "tourist" and they'll usually let you go.

Car rental agencies

Alamo US ⓣ1-800/462-5266, ⓦwww.alamo.com.

Avis US & Canada ⓣ1-800/331-1212, UK ⓣ0870/606 0100, Republic of Ireland ⓣ021/428 1111, Australia ⓣ13 63 33 or 02/9353 9000, New Zealand ⓣ09/526 2847 or 0800/655 111; ⓦwww.avis.com.

Budget US ⓣ1-800/527-0700, Canada ⓣ1-800/268-8900, UK ⓣ0870/156 5656, Australia ⓣ1300/362 848, New Zealand ⓣ0800/283 438; ⓦwww.budget.com.

Dollar US ⓣ1-800/800-3665, Canada ⓣ1-800/229-0984, UK ⓣ 0808/234 7524, Republic of Ireland ⓣ1800/575 800; ⓦwww.dollar.com.

Enterprise Rent-a-Car US ⓣ1-800/261-7331, ⓦwww.enterprise.com.

Hertz US & Canada ⓣ1-800/654-3131, UK ⓣ020/7026 0077, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/870 5777, New Zealand ⓣ0800/654 321; ⓦwww.hertz.com.

National US ⓣ1-800/CAR-RENT, UK ⓣ0870/400 4581, Australia ⓣ0870/600 6666, New Zealand ⓣ03/366 5574; ⓦwww.nationalcar.com.

Nelly US ⓣ1-800/526-6684, ⓦwww.nellyrac.com.

Thrifty US & Canada ⓣ1-800/847-4389, UK ⓣ01494/751 500, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/844 1950, Australia ⓣ1300/367 227, New Zealand ⓣ09/256 1405; ⓦwww.thrifty.com.

Accommodation

The Dominican Republic has become the most visited destination in the Caribbean thanks to its preponderance of all-inclusive hotels, which make package vacations here far cheaper than elsewhere. The all-inclusives do have their downsides: the food is usually mediocre and you'll be stuck in a walled-off complex for your entire trip, which can get claustrophobic. Plenty of other options exist for travellers who want to get out and see the country: luxury high-rise resorts along the capital's Malecón, independently operated beach hotels, rooms for rent in Dominican family homes and an assortment of bearable budget hotels, many with private bath, hot water and air conditioning.

Away from the main tourist spots you can expect to pay around US$20–40/UK£10–20 for the night; in resort towns prices rise to US$40–100/UK£20–50. Reservations are essential for the all-inclusives, where you'll get up to 75 percent off the price by booking with a travel agent as part of a package before you arrive. If you want to stay in an independent hotel during the high season, you will need to book in advance in the major resort towns, but should be able to wing it elsewhere in the country.

Independent hotels and pensiones

When travelling, most Dominicans stay at the spartan **budget hotels** that you'll find dotted throughout the country. If you do likewise you'll save a lot of money, but beware – you often get what you pay for. That means fairly nondescript, box-like rooms, best avoided except for sleep. Some of them have a shared bath and the majority have cold showers. Keep in mind also that when a budget hotel boasts "hot water" showers, this often means a large plastic nozzle on the showerhead that heats the water on the spot, making for a somewhat tepid temperature. Whatever you do, don't touch the nozzles when wet, or you'll risk a painful **electric shock**. Look to spend about US$20–30 for these establishments, though some, especially in the cities, also offer rooms with a/c and television for around US$5 extra. It's easy to mistake the many roadside **cabañas**

Accommodation price codes

All accommodation listed in this guide has been graded according to the following price categories:

① US$15 and under
② US$16–25
③ US$26–35
④ US$36–50
⑤ US$51–75
⑥ US$76–100
⑦ US$101–150
⑧ US$151 and over

Rates are for the cheapest available double or twin room during the **off season** – normally April to mid-December. During the busy season, rates are liable to rise by up to 25 percent (though this is rare at the cheaper hotels) and proprietors may be less amenable to haggling for a price. Many of the all-inclusive hotels have a minimum-stay requirement and rates are quoted per person per night based on double occupancy. Payments at most hotels can typically be made in either Dominican pesos or US dollars, though all-inclusives prefer the latter. Rough Guides price codes take the sixteen percent government tax and ten percent service charge into account; these are often omitted from advertised rates.

turísticas for budget traveller hotels; identifiable by their garish decor and the words "Cabañas Turísticas" emblazoned on the outside, these are in fact the type of hotel that charges by the hour and are mainly used by local couples.

Save for one modest option in Santiago, there are **no youth hostels** in the DR, but a good way to cut expenses is to use the traditional **pensiones** that you'll still find in many towns, though over the past two decades they've begun to die out. These are rooms within a private Dominican home and so offer an excellent opportunity for contact with local people. Pensiones vary widely in quality, so you should have a good look at your room before deciding. If you want to shop around, don't feel guilty about seeing the room and then moving on; expect to pay RD$200–300.

Nicer, **mid-range hotels** are available in areas regularly frequented by foreigners. Ranging between US$35 and US$60, they feature air conditioner, hot water and more pleasant rooms. Hotels at the lower end of this price range are often especially good value; at the higher end you'll get a few luxuries thrown in, like cable TV or breakfast.

If there's one around and you can afford it, you might want to consider the independent **luxury hotels** as well, which accept US dollars (US$80–150). The majority are clustered in Santo Domingo, but you'll also find one in most other major cities and a couple along the rural coast. They range from well-appointed beach hotels and seaside high-rises to full-service, two-storey apartments and renovated colonial stone mansions furnished with sixteenth-century pieces. You can often get better rates (up to thirty percent off) at these hotels on weekends, as they cater mostly to business travellers.

All-inclusive hotels

The Dominican Republic is the archetypal, high-volume **all-inclusive** destination, where a single price covers your room, all meals and drinks and a variety of activities. If you go all-inclusive, you should do so through a **package** arranged by a travel agent in your home country, which will cost you substantially less than arriving at the reception desk and asking for a room.

For couples and families on a tight budget, the all-inclusives can be a wonderful opportunity for a peaceful beach vacation in relative luxury – these places are usually stationed right on the country's prime beachfront. The product offered is usually good and despite a blanket no-tips policy, the staff are generally pleasant and accommodating. It's remarkable that the hotels – most owned by large foreign chains – can maintain their high level of quality given the dirt-cheap price of their packages.

A longstanding issue, though, is the omnipresent **buffet food**, which is often below par; at many resorts you'll have the option of going one or two nights a week to a better restaurant with individual entrees and a few hotels also reserve a few spaces for room-only deals, which will allow you to spend your money at restaurants in town. Nevertheless, the idea of having unlimited access to a resort's facilities at no additional cost is undeniably attractive and it's possible to counteract the claustrophobia that often comes with several days spent in the grounds by taking an organized tour or a guagua ride into the beautiful countryside beyond.

Camping

There are several **campgrounds** in the southwest Dominican Republic and along the Pico Duarte trails, though camping is a fairly new concept here. Outside of the Barahona region though, your best bet is to ask permission first – from village residents if you're on the beach, from a farmer with a large property if you're in the mountains. If you do camp, make sure to clean up after yourself.

Food and drink

If you take all your meals at an all-inclusive hotel, you'll get little sense of how Dominicans eat and drink; the bland "international" buffet fare and watered-down daiquiris on offer at these resorts just can't compete with the delicious, no-nonsense, high-quality cooking at the many mom-and-pop restaurants, or the rum drinks on offer just outside the compound walls.

Meals and cooking styles

Dominicans call their cuisine **comida criolla** and it's a delicious – if often rather greasy – blend of Spanish, African and Taino elements, with interesting regional variants across the island. Dishes usually include rice and beans – referred to locally as *la bandera dominicana* (the Dominican flag) – using either *habichuelas* (red beans) or the tiny black peas known as *morros*. Most often the rice is supplemented with chicken either fried, grilled or served *asopao* (in a rich, soupy sauce). Invariably main courses come with *plátanos* (deep-fried green plantains), which locals often inundate with ketchup and a small coleslaw salad.

Local **breakfasts** are traditionally starchy and huge, designed for people who are about to go work the calories off and typically include *huevos revueltos* (scrambled eggs), sometimes *con jamón* (with bits of ham mixed in); *mangú*, mashed plantains mixed with oil and bits of fried onion; *queso frito*, a deep-fried cheese; *jugo de naranja* (orange juice; also called *jugo de china* in the southwest); and a strong cup of coffee, either *sólo* or *con leche*, but always with a healthy dose of sugar.

Dominican **lunches** are quite hearty and are generally consumed between noon and 2pm, but **dinner** is still the day's main meal and is almost always a family affair. Aside from the omnipresent chicken, popular main courses include *mondongo*, a tripe stew strictly for the strong of stomach; *mofongo*, a tasty blend of plantains, pork rinds and garlic; and *bistec encebollado*, grilled steak topped with onions and peppers. Special occasions, particularly in rural areas, call for either *chivo* (roast goat) with *cassava*, a crispy, flat bread inherited from the Tainos, made with ground yucca roots; or *sancocho*, considered the national delicacy, a hearty stew with five different kinds of meat, four types of tuber and a bewildering array of vegetables and spices.

For the best Dominican offerings, go for the **seafood**, which is traditionally prepared one of the five ways: *criolla*, in a tasty, slightly spicy tomato sauce; *al ajillo*, doused in a rich garlic sauce; *al horno*, roasted with lemon; *al orégano*, in a tangy sauce with fresh oregano and heavy cream; and *con coco*, in a tomato, garlic and coconut milk blend especially prevalent on the Samaná Peninsula. You'll find that the tastiest local fish are the *mero* (sea bass), *chillo* (red snapper) and *carite* (kingfish). Other popular seafoods include *langosta* (clawless lobster), *lambí* (conch), *camarones* (shrimp), *pulpo* (octopus) and *cangrejo* (crab).

Dominican **desserts** are good but extremely sweet; the best of the many types are the *dulces con coco*, made with molasses and coconut shavings. Also popular are *dulces de leche*, usually a bit bland, and *dulces de naranja*, composed of a molasses-orange marmalade that can send you into instant sugar shock. You'll also find a wide variety of cakes, custards and flans on offer, including a distinctive corn custard, *flan de maíz*. A healthier and usually tastier option is to explore the tremendous variety of **tropical fruits**. *Guineos* (bananas), *lechoza* (papaya) and *piña* (pineapple) are the most popular, but you won't regret trying the local *limoncillos*, tiny, delicious lime-like fruits sold in bunches and *chinola*, Dominican passion fruit. The DR is especially known, though, for its out-of-this-world **mangos**; less famous, but simply delicious, are the *fresas* (strawberries) that are widely cultivated in the Constanza region and grow wild in the Sierra Bahoruco.

Where to eat

Eating out can be extremely cheap in the Dominican Republic, provided you stick to the modest-looking local establishments, many of which serve outstanding food. In the more formal dining rooms, prices are higher but are usually still a bargain by European and North American standards. Either way, with the exception of the *cafeterías*, you'll be charged a sixteen percent **sales tax** on your meal and a ten percent "service" charge, though these often find their way into the hands of neither the government nor the waiting staff and instead are kept by the proprietors; it's standard practice to tip an additional ten percent. Outside of the major cities **vegetarians** will often have to make do with rice and beans.

The cheapest places to dine are the **cafeterías**, humble establishments with a few tables and a glass case displaying a variety of typical foods like fried fish, chicken stew, rice and beans, *mangú* and *plátanos*. You can generally get a meal here for under RD$100, but you're best off frequenting them only at lunch, when the food is fresh; by dinnertime the dishes may have been standing for hours under the heat lamps. Also under glass cases are the fried chicken dishes served at the many Dominican **pica pollos**, popular chain outlets with neon, fast-food decor; but far tastier and less aggressively lit are the **pollo al carbón** shacks that serve heaped portions of grilled chicken, rice and beans, and salad; always a good bet for a cheap meal.

Only slightly more expensive, the many Dominican **comedores** are a great resource: unpretentious, family-run restaurants, generally little more than a hole in the wall but often dishing up incredible *comida criolla*, which will set you back around RD$150 for a full meal. For a quick snack, check out the greasy goods of the various **street vendors** hawking *empanadas*, flat fried pastries with a ground-beef filling; *chicharrones*, crunchy bits of deep-fried chicken or pork; shredded barbecue pork sandwiches, boiled corn and split coconuts all for around RD$10; and peeled oranges for RD$3. From time to time you'll also see small children selling trays of home-made *dulces* for RD$2.

You'll find plenty of **high-end** dining in the major cities and the resort towns, generally featuring an array of authentic international cuisine including French, Italian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian and Basque. Count on spending around RD$300–600 at these and don't expect to be seated if you're wearing shorts, a bikini top or a short skirt. Dress codes are far less formal in the **all-inclusive buffet halls**, but the food is a lot more bland. Even at the best of them, don't expect anything special.

Shopping for food

Most Dominicans do their shopping at the many small **colmados** that dot the country, little more than shacks packed with various basic food supplies, an ample selection of liquors and some fresh produce. The *colmados* generally extend a line of credit to their local customers, allowing them to purchase a single spoon of tomato paste, for example, for RD$5, which is added to the running tab. These small portions are necessary because most *campesinos* don't have refrigerators and so only purchase what they need for the day. In the cities and resort centres, you'll find more traditional **grocery stores**, laid out much as they are at home.

Drinking

Dominican **coffee** is among the best in the world. Grown in the heights of the Cordillera Central mountain range, it's a major export earner for the country, sold in the coffee bars and grocery stores of North America and Europe, often misleadingly labelled Costa Rican or Colombian because these nations are more closely associated in the public mind with high-quality coffee production. Most Dominicans take it *sólo*, with a great deal of sugar added, which is the way it's sold for RD$2 by omnipresent morning street vendors and handed out for free in the petrol stations. Dominican *café con leche* is made with steamed milk and is extremely good; the best place to get it is a *comedor*, where you'll pay RD$10–20.

Jugo de naranja, fresh orange juice squeezed as and when you order it, is another omnipresent Dominican morning drink and makes for a good reason to get up; keep in mind they tend to add piles of sugar to it unless you ask them not to. Later in the day you should sample the fresh **coconut milk** sold by street vendors. Dominican **batidas** are popular fruit shakes made with ice, milk and either papaya, mango, pineapple or banana – freshly made in a *comedor*, they bear no relation to the cartoned stuff bearing the same name. A similar drink that's traditionally served in Dominican homes is the **morir soñando**, a heavenly concoction of orange juice, condensed milk, sugar and crushed ice. Meanwhile, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have long been popular throughout the country. Once they were drunk as a matter of national pride, because the beverage companies used Dominican sugar to sweeten them. Today, the drinks are laced with American-made corn syrup, but you'll still find them almost everywhere.

There are several Dominican **beer** brands, but by far the best and most popular is **Presidente**, which is served in both normal-sized (RD$50) and surreally large (RD$100) bottles and compares favourably with beers from across the world. Dominicans are obsessed with getting it as ice-cold as possible – if you don't want it to be a block of ice when you open it, do as they do and rub your hand under the bottom of the bottle before popping the cap. Also popular are the very good, inexpensive local **rums**, Brugal, Barceló and Bermúdez. Of these Bermúdez is the very best, but the dark, aged versions made by all three are quite good. A popular way to drink it is with Coke as a **Cuba libre**. In the discos and bars, ask for a *Cuba libre servicio*: a bottle of rum, two Cokes and a bucket of ice.

Watch out also for a potent local drink called **Mama Juana**, a hard-to-stomach concoction of local wines, rum, honey, and leaves and bark from various trees, which locals claim prolongs both sexual potency and life span. After hearing them go on (and on) about its miraculous properties, you may want to try it at least once. Traditionally, it's supposed to be buried underground for at least three months, then laid out in the sun for another three before consumption. You'll find Mama Juana bottles in the souvenir shops that circumvent this extended process, with the appropriate leaves and bark already added and a recipe for finishing the brew on the label.

The media

It ranges from difficult to impossible to get magazines or newspapers from home, but virtually all hotels will have some form of US news on the TV and many of the high-end hotels get BBC as well. There are virtually no English-language newspapers and magazines available in the country, but there is a vibrant Spanish-language local media that can keep you up to date on the world's events.

Century-old *Listin Diario* is the most reputable of the Dominican daily newspapers, a broadsheet that has weathered a dozen different repressions of the free press over its history and still produces the best investigative journalism in the country, along with excellent sports coverage and a decent international roundup. *El Siglo* is a more recent arrival and a bit more plebeian in its outlook, mixing equal-opportunity haranguing of the three major political parties with good coverage of local music events and a heavy accent on violent crime. *Hoy* is less enlightening than the other two, with rather perfunctory political coverage and a major focus on sports. You should be able to find the *Miami Herald* at the airports and *The New York Times* in high-end hotel gift shops; the odd copy of *Time* and *Newsweek* is available in bookstores.

On **Dominican radio**, you'll find only one American and European pop station in most areas, surrounded by a dozen Latin stations and at least one with 24-hour Pentecostal programming. Flip around a bit and you're likely to come up with a station playing old-style *merengue périco ripao*. In the most rural mountain areas, however, you'll be lucky to tune in to even one station. If you're in the south of the country, flip to *Radio Millon* at 107.9, which features the golden age of Latin music, a real treat and a nice break from the omnipresent thud of merengue everywhere else.

Dominicans have access to cable **television**, which sends out over eighty channels, half in Spanish and half English-language American fare with subtitles, including CNN, various sports channels, the American networks and a number of others that will be familiar to North Americans. Without cable you'll be stuck with, at most, six local stations; one or two will feature the dregs of American cinema past – some with subtitles, some dubbed – while the rest focus on merengue videos, Venezuelan and Mexican soap operas, local talk shows and baseball games.

Festivals

The Dominican Republic has a bewildering barrage of festivals. On every day of the year, there seems to be some kind of celebration somewhere. The majority are the regional fiestas patronales, held in honour of the city's or town's patron saint, who is often an amalgamation with an African god.

These traditional fiestas are one of the great pleasures of a trip to the DR; there's at least one in every city, pueblo and *campo*. The date is dictated by the saint's day as stated in the **Bristol Almanac** (published by pharmaceutical giant Bristol-Myers-Squibb), considered the authoritative source for such matters throughout Latin America. In addition to the actual saint's day, there will often be a nine-night celebration, called a **novena**, leading up to it.

The format of the fiesta follows one of the two models. In more remote parts of the country, the *fiestas patronales* have retained their original character and are syncretic religious ceremonies that feature large **processions** carrying an icon of the saint, religious folk songs accompanied by enormous **palos drums** fashioned from tree trunks, Haitian **gagá** music employing long wooden tubes and keyless metal trumpets that are both blown through and rattled with a stick, and **spirit possession**. Many others in the major towns and tourist areas have shed this religious affiliation and are today merely vibrant outdoor parties with a lot of drinking and a few traditional **contests** like a race to climb up a greased pole. An intermediate version are the many **cattle festivals** of the southeast, where processions of cattle and cowboys descend on the city from all sides. Regardless, they're invariably lively and will certainly be one of the highlights of your trip. In the big city festivals, though, **women travellers** should be prepared to deal with unwanted sexual advances and everyone should take precautions against pickpockets.

Major holidays and festivals

January

Jan 1 Santo Cristo de Bayaguana. A major procession of local bulls to the church in Bayaguana, where some are given to a local priest as a sign of devotion and thanksgiving.

Jan 1 Guloya Festival. The famous mummers of San Pedro de Macorís run a morning procession through the streets of San Pedro's Miramar barrio. A great opportunity to see this unique sub culture's music, costumes and mini dance dramas.

Jan 5–6 Three Kings' Day. The major gift-giving day of the Dominican year.

Jan 21 Virgen de Altagracia. By far the most important religious day on the Dominican calendar, a prayer-of-intercession day to the country's patron and a massive gathering of celebrants in Higüey.

Jan 26 Duarte Day. Holiday in honour of the Father of the Country, with public fiestas in all major towns, biggest in Santiago and La Vega.

February

Feb Carnival. The pre-eminent celebration of the year, held on every Sunday in February and culminating on February 27. La Vega, Bonao and Santo Domingo are your best bets.

Feb 2 Virgen de Candelaria. A religious procession in the capital's barrio San Carlos, in honour of this aspect of the Virgin.

Feb 27 Independence Day. Celebration of independence from Haiti and the culmination of the Dominican Carnival. Battle re-enactments in Santo Domingo and major parties in other big Carnival towns.

March–April

March 19 de Marzo. The major fiesta in Azua, in honour of the battle in which the Haitians were defeated here, ensuring Dominican independence.

Variable, usually early to mid-April Semana Santa. The Christian Holy Week is also the most important week of Haitian and Dominican *Vodú*. Traditional *gagá* festivals take place in the Haitian *bateyes*. Meanwhile, the town of Cabral holds its famous Carnival Cimarrón, in which townspeople adorned with demon masks descend on the city from the lagoon and castigate passers-by with whips.

May

May 2–3 Santa Cruz. A popular nine-night celebration in El Seibo, with a cattle procession to the sixteenth-century church on the final day and a very different spring festival in Azua and Baní, where all of the crosses in the area are covered with bright-coloured paper.

May 3 San Felipe. A huge cultural celebration on Puerto Plata's Malecón, with lots of live music. Seven weeks after Semana Santa.

May 3 Espíritu Santo. In honour of the Holy Spirit, syncretized to the Congo region's supreme deity Kalunda. Best in Santo Domingo's Villa Mella barrio.

June–July

June 3 San Antonio. Great, authentic celebration in the town of Yamasá, two hours north of Santo Domingo.

June 17–24 San Juan Bautista. A religious festival in San Juan de la Maguana in honour of John the Baptist and his African counterpart Chango, plus a smaller fiesta in Baní that features a distinctive style of music called *sarandunga*, a rapid-fire African drum-and-chorus rhythm that's beaten out in drum circles.

June 29 San Pedro Apóstol. A magnificent Cocolo festival in San Pedro de Macorís, with roving bands of *guloyas* performing dance dramas on the street.

July 24–26 Santiago Apóstol. Celebrating Santiago, the warrior patron saint of the Christian armies that conquered Moorish Spain. A large civic festival in Santiago with a lot of requisite partying around the Monument.

August–September

Aug 14 Festival of the Bulls. Higüey's *fiesta patronal*, featuring cowboys on horseback, large herds of cattle, and women carrying an icon of the Virgin on their shoulders and singing traditional *rosarios*.

Aug 16 Restoration Day. Nationwide celebration of independence from Spain, with large parties in Santiago around the Monument and around Plaza España in Santo Domingo.

Sept 24 Virgen de la Merced. A traditional *fiesta patronal* in the small Santo Domingo barrio Mata Los Indios, beginning mid-month, plus nationwide festivities.

Sept 29 San Miguel. This saint's also known as Belíe Belcán and is honoured with major festivals taking place in the capital's Villa Mella and barrio San Miguel, Haina and across the country. Look for the green-and-white-frosted cakes consumed on this day.

October

Oct 14–15 Santa Teresa de Ávila. The patron saint of Elias Piña, where you'll see a wonderful syncretic celebration using *palos* drums, *rosario* processions and *gagá*, plus a less traditional merengue party around the Parque Central.

Third week of October Merengue Festival. A major music festival in Puerto Plata, with major acts playing all over town; lots of partying on the Malecón. Date varies slightly from year to year.

October 24 San Rafael. In Samaná you'll see a procession through the town, partying on the Malecón and a traditional Dominican dance called the *bambulá*, which has died out in the rest of the country.

November–December

Nov 1 Todo los Santos. A major *Vodú* festival in the San Juan de la Maguana and southern border region, especially in nearby pueblo Maguana Arriba, where locals proceed to the cemetery to ask for the release of their relatives for the day.

Dec 4 Santa Bárbara. *Fiesta patronal* for the city of Samaná, including a procession that features the music of Doña Bertilia, queen of the *bambulá*, which is a major popular music on the peninsula.

Dec 28 Festival of the Bulls. Traditional cattle festival in Bayaguana, featuring unique traditional "cattle songs" that are sung to the bulls in order to bless them and prepare them for the January 1 procession to the local church.

Sports and outdoor activities

Not surprisingly, the majority of the country's tourism industry centres on its endless supply of idyllic, palm-fringed beaches and crystalline-clear turquoise waters. Watersports range from swimming, snorkelling, scuba diving, windsurfing and surfing to deep-sea fishing and whale watching.

Though many beaches are protected from powerful ocean currents by natural barriers, others have dangerous rip-tides and should be avoided by all but the strongest swimmers; also worth noting is that the waters off Santo Domingo are shark infested and should be eschewed by all. Inland, the island's many rivers and lakes are perfect for whitewater rafting, canyoning and lake fishing. The country's five separate mountain ranges are popular for mountain biking, horseriding and trekking. In the resorts you'll also find golf courses, tennis courts and, in La Romana's *Casa de Campo*, polo grounds.

Snorkelling and scuba diving

The vast majority of **Dominican reefs** have been damaged beyond repair by careless local fishing practices, notably the daily dropping of anchors by thousands of small vessels. The only area where you'll still find a large system of intact coral reefs lies west of **Puerto Plata**, between La Isabela and Monte Cristi. By no coincidence, this is the most remote coastal region in the country and devilishly difficult to access for scuba diving and snorkelling. A number of tour operators, however, can take you out to parts of the reef.

Along the southern coast, the best snorkelling is in **Bahía de Neiba**, just east of Barahona, where you may spot manatees; at **Isla Catalina**, a small, heavily visited island near La Romana where the fish have been known to eat out of snorkellers' hands; at **Isla Saona**, an enormous mangrove island with decent reefs, just east of Bayahibe; and at **Parque Nacional La Caleta**, just east of Santo Domingo, where the National Parks Department sank a retired treasure-hunting ship called the *Hickory* in 1984, which has since been calcified with new reef that is feeding ground for an array of sea creatures. Numerous private operators and most all-inclusive hotels offer trips to the reefs, wrecks and caves that dot the southeast coast, along with diving instruction. These are listed throughout the guide.

Surfing, windsurfing and kitesurfing

The north coast resort of Cabarete is known internationally as the **windsurfing** capital of the Americas and is the venue for the Cabarete Race Week and the Encuentra Classic, both major world competitions. There are a dozen different windsurfing clubs that offer equipment rental and high-quality tutoring, but the strength of the waves and wind makes it a daunting region for beginners. If you're starting out, the scenic beach town **Las Salinas** along the southern coast has quietly become a centre for windsurfing as well, with milder conditions and a small windsurfing club that's used mostly by wealthy Dominicans.

Perhaps more appealing for beginners, though, is the burgeoning sport of **kitesurfing**, which takes much less time to learn and is truly exhilarating – even beginners are often shot up in the air by their kites as they skate along the waves. See Cabarete (p.185) in Chapter 4 for information on prices and operators. Once surfers have mastered Playa Cabarete's waters, many experts often try their hand at Playa Encuentra several kilometres west, where the waves are titanic and conditions extreme.

Surfing is less organized and done mostly by locals, though there is now a surf camp in Cabarete (see p.188). Other popular venues include Playa Encuentro near Cabarete,

Dominican national parks

In the 1970s, ten percent of Dominican land was set aside for inclusion in a new state-run national park system. This foresight has resulted in the preservation of a diverse range of **ecosystems**, many of which seem out of place in the Caribbean, for example the karst moonscape desert of Jaragua National Park in the southwest, or the craggy, pine-forested alpine peaks of the Bermúdez and Ramírez national parks in the Cordillera Central, which are taller than any North American mountains east of the Mississippi River.

Other popular parks are the mangrove-laden cave system of Los Haitises in the northeast, and archetypal **desert island** Isla Saona in the southeast near Punta Cana. There are also lesser-known mountainous parks in the Sierra Bahoruco, arid desert in Jaragua National Park and a dozen different protected cave systems and **lagoons**.

The most popular parks, such as Bermúdez and Ramírez, have a reasonable amount of **infrastructure** with park offices, and marked trails with cabins for spending the night mid-trek. More secluded and better-preserved areas along the Haitian border or in the **Sierra Bahoruco** are less geared towards tourism, although every year a new crop of independent tourist operations springs up catering to those looking for no-frills wilderness. We've covered these at the appropriate points in the guide.

Playas Grande and Preciosa, just east of Río San Juan, and Playa Boba north of Nagua. Be aware, though, that these are challenging spots for the sport and most have no posted lifeguard or board hire; they should only be used by those with a good deal of experience.

Sailing, fishing and whale watching

The DR is a major port of call for Caribbean **sailors**, with especially good marinas in Luperón, Manzanillo and Samaná, where you'll come across a network of dozens of fellow independent sea-travellers. Be warned, though, that the Puerto Turístico in Puerto Plata should be avoided at all costs, due to a high frequency of robberies and acts of sabotage. Nautical maps of the surrounding waters are hard to come by; your best bet is to pick one up at the marina in Luperón, though some of them will be a bit out of date. **Day-sailors** will find tour operators and independent boats in Puerto Plata, Cabarete, Luperón and Bayahibe that regularly take small groups of passengers on sailing day-trips; prices can run anywhere between RD$500 and RD$2000 for the day, depending on location and length of the excursion.

Many of the all-inclusive resorts feature daily **deep-sea fishing** tours that run around RD$1500 for the day per person, though you typically have to stay at the hotel in order to book them. Standard catches include sea bass, red snapper and kingfish, though you can get good game fish from tours along the southeast coast, including wahoo, porpoise and marlin. Along the northwest coast between Monte Cristi and Luperón, the remarkable reef makes for some tremendous fishing; expect to catch wahoo, king mackerel and dorado year-round, with lots of tuna between June and August, blue marlin from May to September, white marlin between August and October and sailfish from November to April. Away from the hotels, you'll find good big-game fishing, especially for marlin, in southern coastal towns Boca de Yuma and Palmar de Ocóa. There's little in the way of tourist infrastructure in these towns, so ask around at the hotels for a good boat captain and make sure he or she has a working radio and safety equipment. On the south coast, the best months for fishing are from June until early September and you should expect to catch blue and white marlin, dorado and barracuda. In October to January you can still catch abundant sailfish and wahoo. The best **lake fishing** is near remote inland town Cotuí, where the Lago Hatillo, a pretty reservoir surrounded by rolling hills, holds large quantities of lake bass. The easiest way to fish here is to get a recommendation from the owner of local hotel *Rancho del Lago* (see p.244).

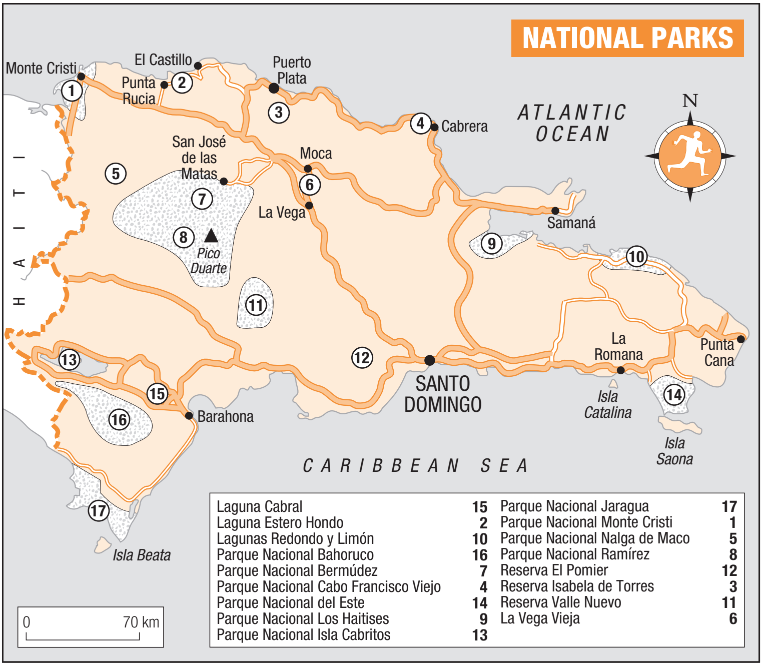
Every winter, over four thousand **humpback whales** from across the Atlantic come to the DR's Bahía de Samaná and Silver Banks Sanctuary to mate, give birth and nurse infants. High season is January and February, with some early arrivals in December and a number of hangers-on in March. Whale-watching boats set out from the town of Samaná every day in high season and you'll also find tour operators that feature week-long boat excursions to Silver Banks (see p.139), during which you'll have the opportunity to swim with the whales.

River sports

Mountain resort town Jarabacoa, deep in the heart of the Cordillera Central, is the centre for **whitewater rafting** and **kayaking**. Several tour operators with experienced guides run daily trips down the turbulent Río Yaque del Norte. Expect a moderately challenging trip with several tricky twists and turns and a couple of steep drops. You can also spend as long as a week kayaking through the Cordillera Central rivers on excursions from operators Rancho Baiguate and Iguana Mama (see p.189). Jarabacoa, Cabarete and Las Terrenas also have terrific opportunities for cascading (descending a rock face on elastic cords) down various waterfalls as high as 75m, which when accompanied by experienced guides is far less dangerous than it sounds, but undeniably exhilarating.

Mountain biking

The DR has five separate mountain ranges that afford almost infinite opportunities for **mountain biking**. Cabarete's Iguana Mama (see p.189) is the one major mountain-bike tour outfit in the country, offering challenging day-trips into the Cordillera Septentrional and week-long mountain-bike and camping excursions from one side of the country to the other. They're also the best place in the DR to go for **bicycle rental**, as they rent out several well-serviced Cannondales for US$30 per day. You'll find **bike clubs** in Santo Domingo and Santiago that go on major mountain-bike excursions across the island on weekends. Be forewarned, though,


NATIONAL PARKS
Monte Cristi
El Castillo
Punta Rucia
Puerto Plata
Cabrera
ATLANTIC OCEAN
N
San José de las Matas
Moca
La Vega
Pico Duarte
Samaná
HAITI
SANTO DOMINGO
La Romana
Punta Cana
Isla Catalina
Isla Saona
Barahona
CARIBBEAN SEA
Isla Beata
0
70 km
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Laguna Cabral	15	Parque Nacional Jaragua	17
Laguna Estero Hondo	2	Parque Nacional Monte Cristi	1
Lagunas Redondo y Limón	10	Parque Nacional Nalga de Maco	5
Parque Nacional Bahoruco	16	Parque Nacional Ramírez	8
Parque Nacional Bermúdez	7	Reserva El Pomier	12
Parque Nacional Cabo Francisco Viejo	4	Reserva Isabela de Torres	3
Parque Nacional del Este	14	Reserva Valle Nuevo	11
Parque Nacional Los Haitises	9	La Vega Vieja	6
Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos	13		

Spectator sports

Baseball is the national spectator sport; many of the top American major leaguers have come from the DR, including Alex Rodríguez, Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martínez (see p.299 for a history of baseball in the DR). A professional winter season is held from mid-November through mid-February, after which the winners go on to compete in the Latin American Championship Series, which is held in the DR every four years (and next scheduled in the DR for 2012). The standard of play in these games is quite high; teams include the hottest up-and-coming Dominican kids along with veteran Dominican major leaguers and promising North American prospects sent here by their organization. Cities that boast professional teams are Santo Domingo (which has two), Santiago, San Pedro de Macorís, La Romana and Puerto Plata. These teams are often coached by former stars like Tony Peña or Juan Marichal.

Tickets are available at all venues on the night of the game (from both the box office and touts) for RD$40–150, depending on where you want to sit. Among the distractions in the stands, you'll find live merengue bands blaring music between innings, dancing-concession salespeople and old men in the back of the bleachers making bets on every movement going on in the field. In addition to this professional season, amateur winter seasons take place in San Francisco de Macorís, San Juan de la Maguana, San Cristóbal and a few other towns. In the summer you can alternately check out the workouts and intramural play in the many major-league baseball camps, run by teams like the Los Angeles Dodgers, the San Francisco Giants, the Boston Red Sox and even Japan's Hiroshima Toyo Carp.

Surpassing baseball in history, if not popularity, cockfighting was brought over from Spain during the colonial era and is still largely considered the national "sport". Fights are typically held in a two-tiered, circular venue called a *club gallístico*, and more informal events take place in backyards. Throughout the countryside you'll see fighting roosters being carried, groomed and cooed at by starry-eyed owners who see them as a potential meal ticket; gambling is central to the sport. Watching the two birds peck at each other for ten minutes (sometimes killing one another but more often inflicting little damage) is less exciting than observing the rabid crowd. Fight preparations are also fascinating: the owners glue translucent brown claws onto the feet, once made of turtle shell but now more often plastic and then spew mouthfuls of water and oil over the feathers, making them more slippery and harder to claw through. The cocks are displayed to the crowd, bets are barked out in a flurry, the birds are let loose in the ring and the mayhem begins.

that if you can't keep up with their pace, they'll have no qualms about leaving you behind; if you're interested, ask first at Iguana Mama for a personal reference.

Hiking

The best **hiking** can be found along the five separate trails that lead from disparate parts of the Cordillera Central to Pico Duarte, the highest peak in the Caribbean. Hikes range from three to six days in length. The even more adventurous will instead want to take the rugged two-day trail from the Haitian border to Nalga del Maco, an enormous system of caverns that's the most revered religious site in the country for devotees of *Vodú*. If you're not up for a multi-day excursion, try one of the several great day-trip hiking trails near Puerto Plata, Monte Cristi, Jarabacoa and Constanza, each outlined in the appropriate section of the guide.

Horseriding

Horseriding excursions are also quite popular. In addition to the plethora of outfits that offer day-rides along the country's many beaches, you'll find good-quality operators in Cabarete, Punta Cana, Las Terrenas, Jarabacoa, San José de las Matas and Río San Juan.

Caving

Another tempting outdoor option available is **caving** in one of the numerous extensive systems throughout the island, many bearing vast collections of Taino rock art. Among the easiest to see are the coastal caves in Parque Nacional Los Haitises, accessible by boat tour, but the most rewarding of all are the series of Taino caves in Parque Nacional del Este near Bayahibe, where Taino art references to Christopher Columbus and the early Spaniards have been discovered. Other prime places for exploration include caves near San Cristóbal, Monción, Cabarete, Las Galeras, Boca de Yuma, Loma de Cabrera, Bánica and Hato Mayor – all of them outlined in the guide. There aren't a lot of organized caving tours, though; typically you'll have to hook up with a local guide and do them on your own, so be sure to bring your own boots and a torch.

Golf

Though there are several small, nondescript **golf courses** spread across the island, three of them stand head and shoulders above the pack: the Pete Dye-designed Teeth of the Dog course at *Casa de Campo* in La Romana and the excellent Robert Trent Jones courses at Playa Dorada and Playa Grande on the Silver Coast. All three have the majority of their holes set on spectacular open oceanfront and are occasionally used as tournament venues.

Shopping

You'll probably be disappointed with the thin selection of local crafts on offer in the DR. Typical are the tacky "faceless dolls of Higüerito" sold in souvenir shops across the country, glazed clay statuettes of featureless, pale-skinned women in Victorian garb. Your best bet for an ostentatious piece of local folk craft is to buy one of the elaborate papier-mâché Carnival masks, though finding them can take some effort if you're not in Santo Domingo (where you can pick them up in Zona Colonial gift shops). Try in one of the major Carnival towns, preferably La Vega or Cabral and ask around. They're easier to track down just before or after February; if you come during the festivities and see someone wearing a particularly interesting one, ask and they may well sell it to you at the month's end for around RD$300.

Another good option are the stores that specialize in jewellery made with **larimar**, a turquoise, semi precious stone found only in the DR, and **amber**, which is mined in the Cordillera Septentrional. You'll find outlets across the island, but if you go to the locations where these substances are mined, it's possible to get large chunks of the stuff for a few pesos; local miners sometimes even sell bits of amber with insects embedded inside them. Beware, though, that many souvenir stores try to rip off tourists with fake amber or larimar. The museums of larimar and amber in Santo Domingo (as well as the amber museum in Puerto Plata) will show you how to identify fakes. A good place to go for quality jewellery is **Harrisons**, a high-end Dominican jewellery store with outlets all over the country; you'll find an array of beautiful craftsmanship at these stores for half the price the same piece would cost at home. They're also working hard to preserve the nation's dwindling coral reefs by removing all of their black coral in favour of **black jade**, another indigenous, semi precious stone.

The most popular souvenirs of all are the local **cigars**, considered by aficionados to be the equal of Cubans. They're easy enough to purchase at souvenir shops across the country, but for a freshly rolled packet that's boxed while you watch, you'll have to go to one of the major cigar towns that surround the city of Santiago, such as Tamboril or Moca.

Rum is another major takeaway for visitors, as the local dark, aged rums are among the world's finest. You can find gift packages of Barceló and Brugal's very best *ron añejo* at stores across the country and in Puerto Plata you can get a decent discount on Brugal's aged rums at their bottling factory tour.

Travel essentials

Costs

Costs are creeping up in the Dominican Republic, for tourists as well as for locals. It is still cheap compared to other Caribbean destinations, with reasonable prices on the ground for independent travellers and budget package deals from the UK, Ireland and the US that include hotel, food and flight for those who want beach on a budget. In many parts of the country shoestring travellers can survive on as little as US$40/£25 per day by getting by as the locals do; having a beer or eating in a local cafeteria cost less than US$/UK£1, for example. The savings are spread unevenly, though: riding from town to town via public transport can cost as little as US$0.50/£0.30, but car rental will set you back at least US$60/£40 a day. You may also want to set aside US$100/UK£65 or so for unexpected splurges like an outdoor activity tour, which are priced to tourist, not local, budgets.

Crime and personal safety

The Dominican Republic is a relatively safe place, but recent increases in urban **crime** were concerning enough for President Leonel Fernández to institute an alcohol curfew in 2007 that shut down bars after 11pm. This draconian move has been successful in dropping the crime rate in the major cities and the restrictions have been loosened significantly.

In cities, you should take the same precautions that you would anywhere else: don't flaunt your wealth with fat rolls of pesos, leave your expensive jewellery at home and avoid walking alone late at night. A more likely scenario is that you'll be the target of a small-scale rip-off, but even these can usually be avoided by not changing money on the street and by following the hints regarding guaguas (see p.22). Sex tourism is visible in tourist towns like Boca Chica, Sosúa and Las Terrenas but it's mostly kept to particular bars and so you are unlikely to be hassled on the street.

With largely common sense, you should get through your trip unscathed. It's best to keep a copy of your passport, airplane ticket and all travellers' cheques at home and another at your hotel. You will need your tourist card (see opposite) and a photo ID on you at all times; a photocopy of your passport is acceptable. A couple of additional precautions will help keep your belongings safe: use the lock box in your room if there is one and take a room on an upper storey if you can. Always keep an eye on your things while you're on the beach and on your luggage at the airport.

Dress

The Dominican Republic is a relatively conservative culture and while T-shirts and shorts are expected and entirely acceptable in resort areas, elsewhere both men and women should avoid wearing shorts and overly revealing clothing; topless men and women with bikini tops, for example, are frowned upon and will offend.

Electricity

Electricity service in the DR has gotten a lot more reliable in recent years, and blackouts are experienced less frequently and only in the more remote corners of the country. Plugs are standard American two-pins, so European visitors should bring suitable adaptors. The voltage is 110v AC. Intermittent, chronic power outages throughout the country mean that you may want to ask if your hotel has a generator that they're willing to use 24 hours a day.

Entry requirements

All visitors are obliged to pay a US$10 cash-only **entry tax** on arrival. Citizens and permanent residents of the US, Canada, the UK, Ireland, Australia, South Africa and all EU countries don't need a **visa** when visiting the Dominican Republic, but must obtain a thirty-day Dominican Republic **tourist card** for US$10 (US dollars only) at the airport on arrival; check first with your airline to see if the price of the tourist card is included in your flight. If you stay for a longer period of time, on departure you will have to pay an additional RD$150 for 15 days to 3 months, RD$250 for 3–9 months, or RD$300 for 9 months to 1 year. New Zealanders must apply to the Dominican consulate in Sydney for an Aus$80 visa, valid for up to sixty days' stay. Whatever nationality, you'll have to show a return ticket home before boarding your flight and your passport on arrival.

Gay and lesbian travellers

Many resort towns like Boca Chica, Sosúa, Cabarete and Las Terrenas have a small but fairly open **gay and lesbian** component but, although homosexuality is legal here, the only parts of the country that have a gay club scene are Santo Domingo (see Chapter 1) and, to a lesser extent, Santiago. The best **website** for gay and lesbian life in the DR is Ⓦwww.monaga.net, which includes a list of gay-friendly hotels. Keep in mind that Dominican culture in general is still a bit homophobic; overt public displays of affection may be met with harassment and you need to be especially careful as you enter and leave gay nightclubs, as assaults are relatively common.

Health

The standards of Dominican **health care** vary widely from institution to institution, even in the capital. Some hospitals don't properly sterilize operating rooms and there are a good number of frauds among the ranks of private doctors. But there are also a number of excellent institutions where you can get high-quality medical care; we've noted outstanding facilities in the appropriate sections of the guide. In emergencies you can dial Ⓣ911 for ambulance and emergency medical care. No specific inoculations are required but it's strongly recommended that you be up to date with your Hepatitis A vaccination in particular, which is not unheard of in the DR and can be contracted more casually than other forms of hepatitis (eg contaminated drinking water). In general, you should do as the locals do and don't drink the **water**. Stick with bottled water for both drinking and brushing your teeth. For longer stays you can buy purified water in four-gallon jugs; if you return the bottle for deposit when you're done, it will cost you only RD$40.

There have been occasional reports of malaria and dengue fever in the Dominican Republic, though the risk of becoming infected is still quite low. Check with your doctor about the necessity of **malaria** pills; most people don't bother because of the extremely low rate of incidence. If you do opt on the side of caution, pay the extra cash and use malarone, as it has few side effects and will not interfere with your enjoyment of the trip.

HIV is a particular concern, as it is around the world. Roughly one percent of the population between the ages of 15–42 is HIV positive, and the rate among sex workers is twenty times higher than that. Unprotected sex with a stranger is a bad idea, period, and condoms are readily available. Swimming in or drinking from rivers and streams also has risks, particularly the dreaded *Giardia*, a bacterium that causes stomach upset, fever and diarrhoea, and *Schistosomiasis*, a freshwater flatworm that can penetrate unbroken skin; both are treatable with antibiotics.

Medical resources for travellers

US and Canada

Canadian Society for International Health ⓦwww.csih.org. Extensive list of travel health centres.
CDC ⓣ1-877/394-8747, ⓦwww.cdc.gov/travel. Official US government travel health site.
International Society for Travel Medicine ⓣ1-770/736-7060, ⓦwww.istm.org. Has a full list of travel health clinics.

Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

Travellers' Medical and Vaccination Centre ⓣ1300/658 844, ⓦwww.tmvc.com.au. Lists travel clinics in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

UK and Ireland

British Airways Travel Clinics ⓣ0845/600 2236, ⓦwww.britishairways.com/travel/healthclinintro/public/en_gb for nearest clinic.
Hospital for Tropical Diseases Travel Clinic ⓣ0845/155 5000 or 020/7387 4411, ⓦwww.thehtd.org.
MASTA (Medical Advisory Service for Travellers Abroad) ⓣ0870/606 2782, ⓦwww.masta.org for the nearest clinic.
Travel Medicine Services ⓣ028/9031 5220.
Tropical Medical Bureau Republic of Ireland ⓣ1850/487 674, ⓦwww.tmb.ie.

Insurance

It is a sound idea to take out **travel insurance** coverage to cover against theft, loss and illness or injury. Before paying for a new policy, however, it's worth checking whether you are already covered: some all-risks home insurance policies may cover your possessions when overseas and many private medical schemes include cover when abroad. In Canada, provincial health plans usually provide partial cover for medical mishaps overseas, while holders of official student/teacher/youth cards in Canada and the US are entitled to meagre accident coverage and hospital in-patient benefits.

Students in the US will often find that their student health coverage extends during the vacations and for one term beyond the date of last enrolment.

After checking out the possibilities above, you might want to contact a specialist travel insurance company. A typical travel insurance policy usually provides cover for the loss of baggage, tickets and – up to a certain limit – cash or cheques, as well as cancellation or curtailment of your journey. Most of them exclude so-called dangerous sports unless an extra premium is paid: in the Dominican Republic this can mean scuba diving, whitewater rafting, windsurfing and trekking, though probably not kayaking or jeep safaris.

Internet

Virtually every town in the Dominican Republic has public **internet** access by way of phone centres, internet cafés and wi-fi access in restaurants, and from most mid-range and luxury hotels; the latter also tend to have at least one computer available for guests. Connection speed is not a problem in the DR, and you'll find using high-bandwidth services

Rough Guides travel insurance

Rough Guides has teamed up with WorldNomads.com to offer great **travel insurance** deals. Policies are available to residents of over 150 countries, with cover for a wide range of **adventure sports**, 24hr emergency assistance, high levels of medical and evacuation cover and a stream of **travel safety information**. Roughguides.com users can take advantage of their policies online 24/7, from anywhere in the world – even if you're already travelling. And since plans often change when you're on the road, you can extend your policy and even claim online. Roughguides.com users who buy travel insurance with WorldNomads.com can also leave a positive footprint and donate to a community development project. For more information go to ⓦ**www.roughguides.com/shop**.

like Skype relatively easy. The going rate is typically RD$30 per 30min.

Laundry

Hotels typically offer **laundry service** and there are laundrettes in the major cities of the DR. These days, it's normal to have to pay per item, with the following prices a rough guide to what you should expect: trousers RD$20, men's shirt RD$15, blouses RD$20, underwear RD$5 and socks RD$5.

Living in the Dominican Republic

Many foreigners work in the tourism industry as adventure sport instructors or reps for all-inclusive resorts; most of these people work illegally on a tourist card, as it's phenomenally expensive and time-consuming to obtain an official **work permit**. If you're at a North American college, it's worth checking whether your school is one of the many to operate an exchange programme with the Catholic University in Santiago. Study, work and volunteer opportunities are listed below.

Study and work programmes

BTCV (British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) ⓣ01302/388 888, ⓦwww.btcv.org.uk. One of the largest environmental charities in Britain, with a programme of national and international working holidays (as a paying volunteer).

BUNAC US ⓣ1-800/GO-BUNAC, UK ⓣ020/7251 3472, Republic of Ireland ⓣ1/477 3027; ⓦwww.bunac.org. Organizes working holidays in a range of destinations for students.

Camp America UK ⓣ020/7581 7373, Canada ⓣ902/422-1455, Australia ⓣ03/9826 0111, NZ ⓣ9416 5337, SA ⓣ021/419 5740; ⓦwww.campamerica.co.uk. Organizes cultural exchange programmes all over the world.

Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) US ⓣ1-800/40-STUDY or 1-207/533-7600, UK ⓣ020/8939 9057; ⓦwww.ciee.org. Leading NGO offering study programmes and volunteer projects around the world.

Peace Corps 1990 K St NW, Washington DC 20526 ⓣ1-800/424-8580, ⓦwww.peacecorps.gov. Maintains a large presence in the Dominican Republic, placing people with specialist qualifications or skills in two-year postings. Their operation in the Dominican Republic is considered one of their best.

Transformational Journeys ⓣ816/361-2111, ⓦwww.tjourneys.com. Organizes mission trips to the Barahona region, particularly around the sugar-growing regions, in which you'll help build a piece of community infrastructure and stay in the home of a local family.

Mail

Dominican *correos*, or **post offices**, are notoriously slow; even if you use special delivery (highly recommended) you'll still have to allow at least three weeks for your postcard or letter to reach North America and at least a month for it to reach Europe or Australasia. Postage costs RD$5 to North America, RD$8 elsewhere. You can cut these delivery times by as much as a week if you use the central *correos* in Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata or Santiago, which have specific special-delivery windows; look for the "*entrega especial*" sign. Sending packages is unreliable (damage and theft are frequent) and not recommended unless absolutely necessary; if you must send parcels, bring them unsealed to the post office for inspection. Whatever you do, don't use the postal boxes that you'll see on the streets of many towns – you'll be lucky if the mail is picked up once a month – and don't ever send money or other valuables. A private postal service operates in Cabarete and Las Terrenas (see p.192).

The most convenient way to receive mail is to have it sent to your hotel, though most post offices have a reasonably reliable *lista de correos*, where mail is held for you for up to four weeks, for a charge of RD$10 per letter. Bring your passport (or a photocopy) when picking up mail and make sure that correspondents address letters to you under your name as it appears on your passport.

Money

There are two distinct economies within the Dominican Republic, the **US dollar** economy of the all-inclusive hotels and tour operators and that of the official Dominican currency, the **peso** (RD$). Throughout most of the country, you will have to change any foreign currency into pesos in order to conduct transactions. At the all-inclusive resorts and other foreign-owned tourism companies, though, all prices will be quoted in US dollars and Dominican pesos are accepted reluctantly – and at a poor rate.

Today the peso floats freely against the dollar, which means that there's some variation in exchange rate from day to day; it hovered at 37 pesos to the US dollar and 57 pesos to the British pound at the time this book went to press.

ATM machines are available across the country, even in fairly small towns. **Visa** and **MasterCard** are accepted in major cities and tourist destinations, and Amex is accepted in most large hotels and resorts, but when travelling in the countryside, expect to pay in pesos.

Opening hours and public holidays

Banks and most businesses are typically open Mon–Fri 9am–12.30pm & 2–5pm, Sat 9am–12.30pm, though retail and other shops often stay open all afternoon and on weekends. There is no standard set of opening hours applicable to museums and colonial landmarks, but the opening hours of each are outlined in the guide.

Phones

Phone rates are typically expensive from your hotel room, but there are phone centres in every town that will allow you to call home. The going rate is RD$6 per minute to North America, RD$16 to Europe and RD$3.50 for calls within the country. You can purchase local **sim cards** for your mobile phone from RD$100. Orange is by far the best-value vendor with the most national coverage and offices across the country. Their **phone cards** are sold in stores as well as by street vendors at major intersections of the cities and major highways. If you do bring your own mobile phone, keep in mind that radical **roaming charges** can be applied to calls made in the Dominican Republic; it's best to check roaming rates with your carrier ahead of time.

Making calls

The Dominican Republic shares the same dialling prefix as the US (1), and the vast majority of phone numbers share a **country-wide area code** (☎809), though recently the new area codes ☎829 and 849 have been added nationally to allow for an increased number of mobile phones and fax lines. In this guide the default area code ☎809 is assumed and ☎829 or ☎849 are explicitly stated in individual business listings. To call the Dominican Republic **from the US or Canada**, or to call from one region of the DR to another, you simply dial 1 plus the area code and the seven-digit local number. From all other countries, dial ☎001 plus the area code and seven-digit number.

Time

The Dominican Republic is in North America's Eastern Standard Time Zone (same time as New York and Atlanta) and five hours behind GMT. There is no daylight savings time.

Tourist information

The Dominican government also maintains tourist offices and toll-free tourist hotlines throughout the country and in the UK and North America (see opposite), which can be

Calling home from abroad

Note that the initial zero is omitted from the area code when dialing the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand from abroad.

US and Canada international access code + 1 + area code.

Australia international access code + 61 + city code.

New Zealand international access code + 64 + city code.

UK international access code + 44 + city code.

Republic of Ireland international access code + 353 + city code.

South Africa international access code + 27 + city code.

helpful in hooking you up with tour operators and package travel agents. The glossy promotional materials handed out by Dominican consuls and tourist agencies are pretty to look at but seriously lacking in hard facts.

The tourist office **maps** aren't especially good, but you can find several excellent ones of the country in travel bookstores and online; National Geographic's Dominican *Republic Adventure Map* is especially accurate and detailed. Mapas Gaar, El Conde 502, 3rd Floor, Santo Domingo, RD (☎688-8004; closed Sun), has navigational charts of the surrounding waters and wall-sized, detailed blueprints of most Dominican towns.

Tourism offices

Canada 2980 Crescent St, Montreal, PQ H3G 2B8 ☎514/499-1918; 35 Church St, Toronto, ON M5E 1T3 ☎416/361-2126.
UK Dominican Republic Tourist Board, 18–22 Hands Court, High Holborn, London WC1 ☎020/7242 7778. Call ☎0900/1600 305 for brochure.
US 1501 Broadway, Suite 410, New York, NY 10036 ☎1-888/374-6361; 561 W Diversey, Suite 214, Chicago, IL 60614 ☎773/529-1336; 2355 Salzedo St, Suite 307, Coral Gables, FL 33134 ☎305/444-4592.

Useful websites

The Dominican Republic maintains a large presence on the internet although ferreting out a specific piece of information can take some time. The following are a few tried-and-tested sites.

Ⓦ**www.activecabarete.com** Terrific website devoted to Cabarete, with a detailed interactive map and a complete listing of hotels, restaurants, bars, current wind conditions, a calendar of events and other local services.

Ⓦ**www.debbiesdominicantravel.com** A dizzying array of links to hundreds of Dominican-related sites and a deep archive of travellers' personal accounts of all-inclusive vacations.

Ⓦ**www.dr1.com** The most heavily trafficked Dominican message board and the best place to get information on the web. Also has a good daily news bulletin that you can sign up for.

Ⓦ**www.hispaniola.com** A site dedicated to Dominican tourism, with a Dominican Spanish phrasebook, daily weather, a message board and an interactive map of Cabarete.

Ⓦ**www.listindiario.com.do** Online version of the DR's most venerable newspaper, with the best Dominican news coverage on the internet.

Ⓦ**www.paginasamarillas.com.do** Home page of the Dominican Republic's premier phone company, with a comprehensive *Yellow Pages* covering the entire country.

Ⓦ**www.popreport.com** An exhaustive news bulletin and comprehensive roundup of tourist attractions and businesses in the Puerto Plata area.

Travellers with children

The all-inclusive resorts are especially helpful when you're travelling with children, as they're in self-contained spaces, provide three meals a day and are generally designed to take care of the daily tasks of life for you. All resorts make at least some token effort toward **children's activities** and some are quite good at it. Independent travellers will find that the DR is a family-oriented place, and that locals are welcoming to small children.

You should watch out particularly for the **sun** – which is dangerously strong; spf25 and above is recommended – and the **water**: children are particularly susceptible to gastro intestinal problems caused by tap water and you should make sure the whole family brush their teeth with bottled water.

You'll find that Dominicans love children and will focus a lot of positive attention on them. They're also more accepting of them in **restaurants** and hotels, and are unlikely to be bothered by any ancillary small-children chaos or noise; public **breastfeeding**, though, is pretty much unheard of. It's easy enough to buy **nappies** and the like in grocery stores, pharmacies and even rural *colmados*.

Travellers with disabilities

There are unfortunately few facilities that make independent travelling easier for the disabled in the DR, and no rental cars come with hand controls, though certain major monuments have access ramps. Most of the **all-inclusives**, though, have wheelchair access to certain rooms and all of their restaurants, casinos, bars and beaches. Call the hotel directly before booking a package for specific details regarding the hotel's infrastructure.

Women travellers

Though violent attacks against female tourists are relatively uncommon, many **women** find that the constant barrage of hisses, hoots and comments comes close to spoiling their vacation. Dominican men are quite aggressive and women travellers should come armed with the knowledge that they will draw incessant attention whether they like it or not. Also, at major festivals and on crowded streets, you may be subjected to a lot of groping hands. Whatever you do, don't be afraid to seem rude; even the mildest polite response will be considered an indication of serious interest.

Guide

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① Santo Domingo and around 47

② The southeast 92

③ The Samaná Peninsula 129

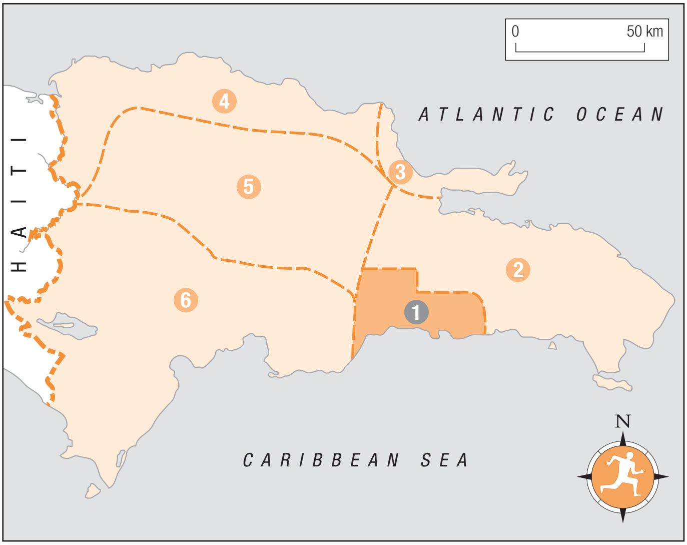
④ The Silver Coast 159

⑤ The Cibao 211

⑥ The southwest 245

1

Santo Domingo and around


0
50 km
ATLANTIC OCEAN
HAITI
CARIBBEAN SEA
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1
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6

CHAPTER 1 Highlights

✱ **The Zona Colonial** Pick through the sixteenth-century ruins of the first European city in the Americas, founded and ruled by the Columbus family. **See p.58**

✱ **The Malecón** Dubbed "The World's Largest Disco" by the *Guinness Book of World Records*, this seaside promenade stretches on and on for kilometres and holds many of the city's major discotheques. **See p.68**

✱ **Plaza de la Cultura** Four large museums and the sumptuous National Theatre. Especially memorable are the Museo de Arte Moderno and the Museo del Hombre Dominicano. **See p.70**

✱ **Old-style Cuban son** Several clubs across town feature some of the best Buena Vista-style old-school son in the world. **See p.78**

✱ **La Guácara Taina** Unique disco set in a massive five-storey cave, with live music and a thriving rave scene. **See p.80**

✱ **Baseball at Estadio Quisqueya** The enthusiasm of the crowd makes watching a baseball game in the heart of the DR a thrill regardless of whether or not you're a baseball fan. **See p.81**

▲ Zona Colonial

1

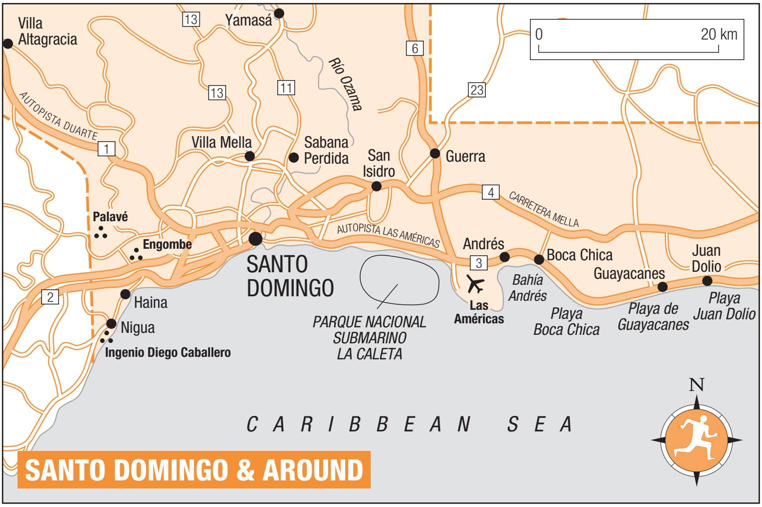
Santo Domingo and around

From every approach into the Dominican Republic's bustling capital, **Santo Domingo** gives a bad first impression. Traffic belches fitfully through its streets (which seem eternally under construction), the air pollution is epic and the monotonous vista of concrete-box construction is alleviated only by the neon signs of strip malls and motor repair shops. Equally jarring is the visibly uneven distribution of wealth in a city of 2.5 million that's dominated by ramshackle slums but has the highest per capita of Mercedes-Benz owners in the hemisphere.

The city certainly isn't the tropical paradise for which most travellers come to the Caribbean, but once you penetrate the outer sprawl you'll find the old Spanish colonial capital – the first European city of the New World – magically intact along the western bank of the Río Ozama. This was the domain of **Christopher Columbus**: founded by his brother Bartolomé, ruled by him for a time and claimed a decade later by his son Diego. After five centuries, the Columbus palace can still be found alongside the cobbled streets and monumental architecture of the walled, limestone city the family built. It was here that decisions with major repercussions for the rest of the hemisphere were made, for better or worse.

Indeed, an extraordinary number of New World firsts took place here, including the building of the first cathedral, university, monastery, nunnery and hospital – all a result of the **Catholic Church** sending missionaries to proselytize the natives and all on display, in various forms of decay, in the Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo's historic district. From the Fortaleza Ozama, one of the structures that remains in that district, conquistadors set off to conquer the rest of the Caribbean and the American mainland, ensuring European domination over the hemisphere and the city's continued influence as a power base. Santo Domingo was also where the Atlantic **slave trade** was inaugurated – its newly constructed sugar mills needing forced labour to work the fields – where Old and New World **diseases** initially exchanged hands, Columbus's men swapping smallpox and tuberculosis for yellow fever and syphilis.

Far more than just history makes Santo Domingo an integral part of any trip to the Dominican Republic; it is, after all, the modern face of the country and as such has a nonstop liveliness not seen in many other places. Its Latin music scene is the most vibrant in the nation, its baseball stadium jam-packed with fanatics and it also


Villa Altagracia
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Río Ozama
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11
23
AUTOPISTA DUARTE
1
Villa Mella
Sabana Perdida
San Isidro
Guerra
4
CARRETERA MELLA
Palavé
Engombe
AUTOPISTA LAS AMÉRICAS
Andrés
SANTO DOMINGO
3
Boca Chica
Juan Dolio
Guayacanes
Bahía Andrés
2
Haina
Las Américas
Playa de Guayacanes
Playa Juan Dolio
Nigua
PARQUE NACIONAL SUBMARINO LA CALETA
Playa Boca Chica
Ingenio Diego Caballero
N
CARIBBEAN SEA

SANTO DOMINGO & AROUND

serves as the main repository of high culture, seen in its number of museums and venues for more high-brow artistic endeavours, including ballet and opera.

The vitality extends to the very reachable beaches east of the city, at **Boca Chica** and **Juan Dolio**, both fairly built-up with resorts to accommodate visitor traffic; Juan Dolio is by far the better choice of the two, as Boca Chica has become over-developed and unpleasant. Back west, before hitting industrial cities like San Cristóbal (see p.250) and Baní (see p.252), you can scavenge around the ruins at several sugar mills, such as **Palavé manor** and **Engombe**, for another look into the area's past, a perfect complement to Santo Domingo's colonial core.

Santo Domingo

SANTO DOMINGO is the biggest and most interesting city in the country, with impressive historic and cultural sites that make an arresting counterpoint to the beaches. Most visitors therefore make a beeline for the **Zona Colonial**, the city's substantial colonial district, with dozens of wonderful old buildings and a dramatic setting right on the Río Ozama. In fact, many never bother to venture outside this neighbourhood, but while it obviously merits the most attention there's plenty more to see and do. As you might expect, the capital also has the country's best restaurants and nightlife and serves as its cultural centre, with two wonderful museums, the **Museo del Hombre Dominicano** and **Museo Prehispánico**, dedicated to preserving the artefacts of the Taino civilization that thrived here before Columbus; the **Museo de Arte Moderno**'s display of contemporary Dominican visual art; and a thriving **music scene** that focuses on the down-and-dirty merengue, bachata and son played in the clubs.

Santo Domingo's night activity is centred on its **Malecón** – a breezy, palm-lined promenade that runs parallel with the Caribbean Sea – and there are plenty more places to party further inland. Modern Santo Domingo also hides some open spaces offering relief from the gridlock, including the expansive **botanical gardens**, the wooded sports complex **Centro Olímpico** and a set of tropical cave lagoons called **Los Tres Ojos**. If visiting in winter, check out the spirited professional **baseball games** of Santo Domingo's two teams, Licey and Escogido, at Estadio Quisqueya.

Some history

The Río Haina, which borders Santo Domingo to the west, was once the site of a Taino village discovered by Spaniard Miguel Díaz, who fled Columbus's first settlement, La Isabela, after stabbing a fellow colonist in a drunken brawl. Locals gave him a gold nugget found near the river, which he brought back to the Spanish outpost where Christopher's brother **Bartolomé Columbus** was in charge while his brother was in Spain. The La Isabela outpost had been a complete disaster and most colonists who hadn't already died of yellow fever had mutinied and abandoned the town. Spurred on, however, by dreams of gold, Bartolomé set sail with his remaining men in 1496 to establish a colony on the eastern bank of the Ozama. When Columbus returned in 1498, he took command of the new town, but had trouble controlling the colonists and was recalled by Spain two years later. His replacement, **Nicolás de Ovando**, moved the city to the western bank and began the monumental stone construction that remains to this day, work that was continued by Columbus's son Diego when he took over in 1509. During their rule the city was a satellite capital of Spanish possessions, from which conquistadors set out to colonize and rule the rest of the Caribbean and the American mainland.

Once Spain found greater wealth in the silver mines of Mexico and Peru, Santo Domingo's power and influence quickly eroded. An earthquake in 1562 destroyed much of the town and in 1586 **Sir Francis Drake** captured Santo Domingo, looted it and burned it down. Once rebuilt, the city failed to regain its strategic relevance and instead became subject to more attacks by the British and French over the next century until finally, in 1801, Haitian **Touissant L'Ouverture** took it without a fight. A succession of short-lived occupations followed, including the French in 1802, the British in 1803, the French again in 1804, the British again in 1809 and the Spaniards in the same year. By the time this spate of invasions was over, the city was economically devastated.

A much longer occupation was to follow – the Haitian domination from 1822 to 1843. They quickly alienated the Dominicans by implementing a land reform programme that robbed the Church and many wealthy white colonists of most of their land. As a result, Spanish merchants in the capital joined with the Catholic hierarchy to form the **Trinitarian movement** – named for its three leaders, the "Trinity" of Duarte, Mella and Sánchez – that led to independence after a long partisan war. But self-determination immediately devolved into internal strife as the city was besieged and captured again and again by competing Dominican *caudillos*, a cycle that ended only with the brutal regime of **Rafael Leonidas Trujillo**, who renamed the capital Ciudad Trujillo in 1936 (though it was changed back immediately on his death in 1961) and transformed it from a mere administrative capital to the national centre of shipping and industry. A military coup and American invasion in 1965 were the last major battles to take place here, during which the Americans cordoned off the city along avenidas Mella and Independencia; the pro-democracy demonstrators were kept in check within it, while the Dominican military controlled the territory outside it and butchered hundreds of their enemies. Since then, industrialization and urban migration have forced the city outwards and, though the last forty years have been the longest stretch of peace Santo Domingo has seen in two centuries, the tough living conditions of many inhabitants make it less than idyllic.

Arrival

Santo Domingo boasts the largest number of international flights, bus routes and guagua routes on the island.

By air

Most visitors arrive at **Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas** (☎549-0081, Ⓦwww.aerodom.com), the country's largest, 13km east of the city proper. There's a Banco de Reservas **currency exchange** at the exit to the luggage pick-up area, an **ATM** at the airport exit and a few fast-food restaurants scattered within the terminal. Once through customs you'll be accosted by an array of touts offering accommodation, taxi service and car rental. The latter are particularly aggressive; if you're thinking of getting a car, best to arrange beforehand (see p.23). If you haven't planned ahead, it's best to go directly to the bank of agency booths just south of the luggage-area exit; though the price is a bit higher, it's always safer to stick with established international agencies. Keep in mind also that there's an RD$30 toll as you leave the airport by car.

The airport is far enough away from the city centre to make a **taxi** easiest if you're not renting a car; look for the official brown sticker on the windshield and expect to pay around RD$1500, though you can usually negotiate drivers down during daylight hours. It's possible to get into town for as little as RD$150 provided you're willing to tough it out on the city's unregulated **public transport** system – but make sure you have small-denomination bills before you set off. From the airport, take an RD$50 *motoconcho* ride to the turn off for the Carretera Las Américas, where you'll wait in a small car park for a minute or two before the next *público* mini van arrives and loads up passengers. The van will take you all the way to Santo Domingo's Parque Enriquillo for RD$100, where you can catch a guagua or taxi to the Zona Colonial or the Malecón. This park is safe enough during the day, but gets dodgy at night; you're better off taking a taxi after dark.

Domestic flights on Air Santo Domingo and American Eagle arrive at the smaller **Aeropuerto Herrera** (☎365-6100), Avenida Luperón, on the city's west side. Private taxis (RD$300 from here to the Zona Colonial) and *públicos* (RD$25 to the Malecón) are in abundance at the front entrance. Onward *públicos* to the Zona Colonial depart from the Malecón. Because of heavy traffic in this area, you can expect the journey from the airport to **Parque Independencia** to take 25 minutes in a taxi or 40 minutes by public transport.

By car

If you arrive in Santo Domingo **by car** from the Cibao or the Silver Coast, you'll hit the northern end of town on the Autopista Duarte, which becomes Avenida Kennedy once you reach the city limits. Arriving **from the east**, follow the signs marked "Centro Ciudad" until you cross the Río Ozama on the Duarte bridge. This takes you onto Avenida Mexico; a left on Calle 30 de Marzo will lead you directly to Parque Independencia in the Zona Colonial and, a little further on, the Malecón. Entering **from the west** via the Carretera San Cristóbal, follow the signs that lead to the Malecón. If you're simply **passing through** the city from one region to another, it's best to take the bypass, which is called Avenida Azar from the west (where it connects from the Autopista Duarte) or Avenida Charles de Gaulle from the east (from Avenida Las Américas).

By bus and guagua

A fairly sophisticated **bus system** links Santo Domingo to the rest of the country. If coming by bus, you'll have no trouble finding a taxi or public transport from your **terminal**: Caribe Tours lets passengers off at Avenida 27 de Febrero and Miraflores (Ⓣ221-4422, Ⓦwww.caribetours.com.do); Metro at Avenida Winston Churchill and Calle Hatuey, behind the Plaza Central (Ⓣ544-4580, Ⓦwww.metrotours.com.do), which also has departures into the city and across the country direct from Las Américas airport; and Terrabus at Guarocuya 4 (Ⓣ531-0383). Transporte del Cibao (Ⓣ685-7210) has slightly more downmarket connections from Puerto Plata, Sosúa and Santiago that arrive at Ravelo 92 near Parque Enriquillo, which also happens to be where you'll end up if you're arriving **by guagua** from either the Southeast or the Barahona region. From here you can catch an RD$20 *público* to Parque Independencia and the Zona Colonial. Guaguas from the north typically drop you off at a chaotic traffic circle that intersects 27 de Febrero and Charles de Gaulle at the northwestern city limits, from where you can catch a guagua or *público* to the centre of town.

Information

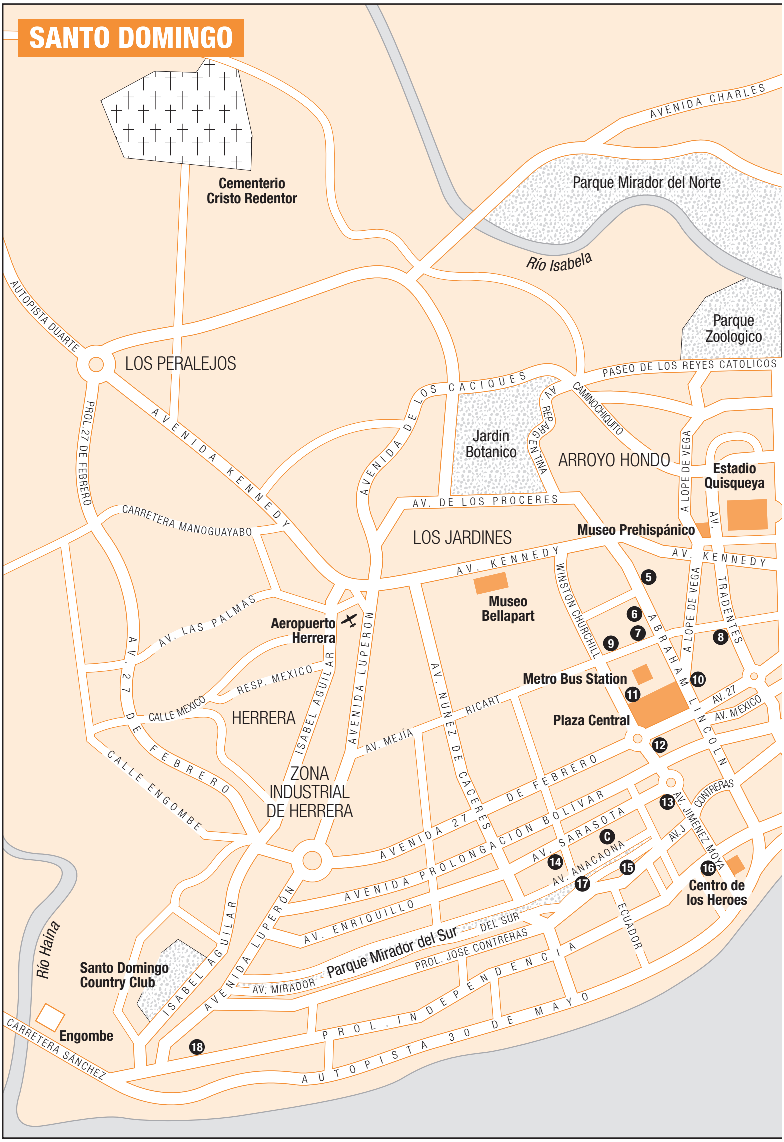
The Department of Tourism's main office is on Avenida Mexico and 30 de Marzo (Ⓣ221-4660), but they're not set up to provide information directly to visitors so you're really better off asking at your hotel or relying on a tour operator. Alternatively, **Mapas Gaar**, El Conde 502 and Espaillat, third floor (Ⓣ688-8004; closed Sun), is an independent shop that has good **road maps** and **city guides**, and navigation charts for sailors, although some of these are out of date.

The **National Park Office** has a main office in Gazcue (Ⓣ472-3717) on Independencia 539 at the corner of Cervantes; here you can get some basic information on the nation's park system as well as advance permits to enter the parks.

There are four daily Spanish-language **newspapers** in Santo Domingo, and all are available for free on the web. *Hoy*'s "Agenda" section (Ⓦwww.hoy.com.do) has event listings, as does *Listin Diario*'s "La Vida" (Ⓦwww.listin.com.do). *El Nacional*'s "Que Pasa" section (Ⓦwww.elnacional.com.do) is good for cinema schedules and *Diario Libre* (Ⓦwww.diariolibre.com) is a widely available freebie that does a pretty comprehensive events listing for the city.

City transport

A new RD$20 **Metro** train line stretching north/south between the Centro de los Héroes and Villa Mella has recently rolled out in Santo Domingo, with a second line under construction that will run east/west along avenidas JFK and de Gaulle, slated for completion in 2012; the most convenient downtown stop for the current line is at the corner of Independencia and Churchill. For now though the informal network of *públicos* and guaguas is generally more convenient than the Metro. A study in successful anarchy, they manage to cover every inch of the city and its outer districts and can get you pretty much anywhere for around RD$30;


SANTO DOMINGO
Cementerio Cristo Redentor
Parque Mirador del Norte
Río Isabela
Parque Zoologico
AVENIDA CHARLES
PASEO DE LOS REYES CATOLICOS
Santiago
Palavé
San Cristóbal (30km)
AUTOPISTA DUARTE
LOS PERALEJOS
PROL.27 DE FEBRERO
AVENIDA KENNEDY
AVENIDA DE LOS CACIQUES
Jardin Botanico
AV. REP. ARGENTINA
CAMINOCHIQUITO
ARROYO HONDO
AV. LOPE DE VEGA
Estadio Quisqueya
AV. TRADENTES
AV. DE LOS PROCERES
LOS JARDINES
Museo Prehispánico
AV. KENNEDY
CARRETERA MANOGUAYABO
Museo Bellapart
WINSTON CHURCHILL
ABRAHAM LINCOLN
AV. LAS PALMAS
Aeropuerto Herrera
AVENIDA LUPERON
ISABEL AGUILAR
RESP. MEXICO
CALLE MEXICO
HERRERA
AV. 27 DE FEBRERO
CALLE ENGOMBE
ZONA INDUSTRIAL DE HERRERA
AV. MEJÍA
RICART
AV. NUÑEZ DE CACERES
Metro Bus Station
Plaza Central
AV. 27
AV. MEXICO
AVENIDA 27 DE FEBRERO
AVENIDA PROLONGACIÓN BOLIVAR
AV. SARASOTA
AV. ANACAONA
AV. J
AV. JIMENEZ MOYA
CONTRERAS
Centro de los Heroes
ECUADOR
AV. ENRIQUILLO
Parque Mirador del Sur
DEL SUR
PROL. JOSE CONTRERAS
AV. MIRADOR
PROL. INDEPENDENCIA
AUTOPISTA 30 DE MAYO
ISABEL AGUILAR
AVENIDA LUPERON
Santo Domingo Country Club
Río Haina
Engombe
CARRETERA SANCHEZ
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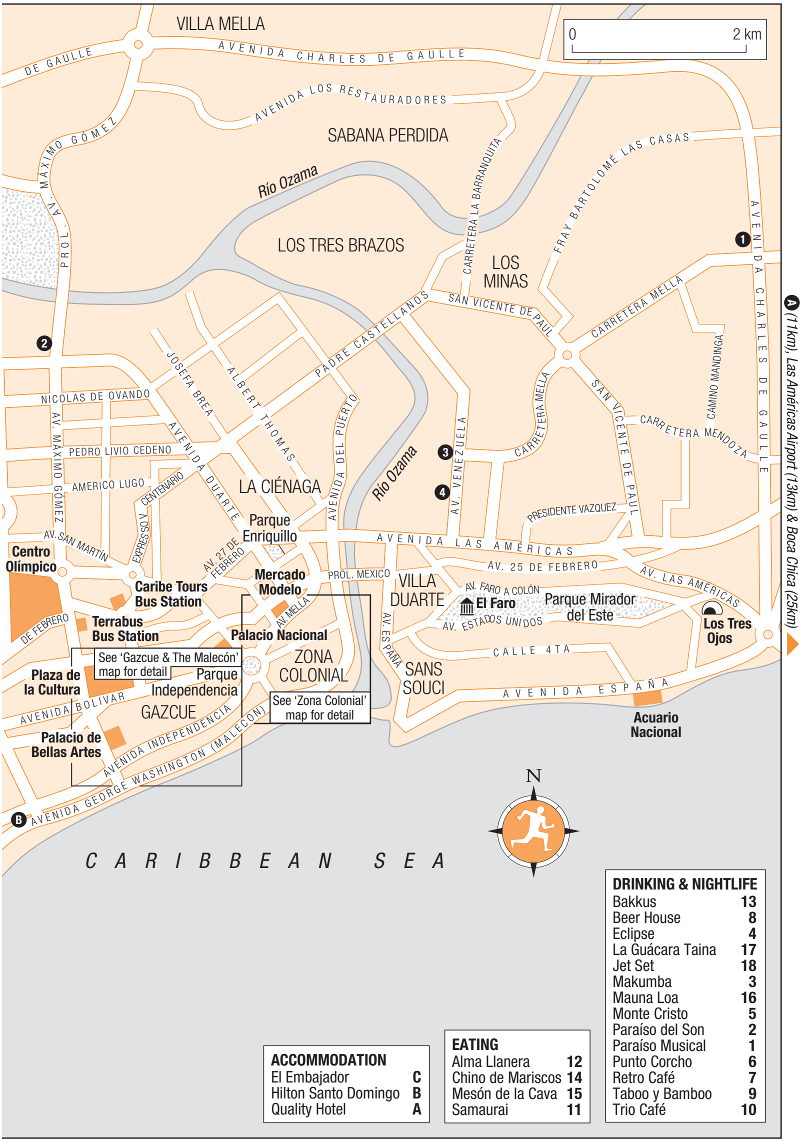
most *público* rides cost RD$10–20. Just stand on the corner of a major street and wave your arms at the first car with a taxi sign on the roof, provided you don't mind being crammed in with as many other people as can fit.

More comfortable are the slightly less tatty looking private **taxis** found at the Parque Independencia, along El Conde and in front of the large Malecón hotels. Alternatively you can call a taxi from other locations (see p.85).


VILLA MELLA
0 2 km
AVENIDA CHARLES DE GAULLE
DE GAULLE
AVENIDA LOS RESTAURADORES
SABANA PERDIDA
AV. MAXIMO GÓMEZ
PROL.
Río Ozama
LOS TRES BRAZOS
CARRETERA LA BARRANQUITA
LOS MINAS
FRAY BARTOLOMÉ LAS CASAS
AVENIDA CHARLES DE GAULLE
1
2
3
4
SAN VICENTE DE PAUL
CARRETERA MELLA
PADRE CASTELLANOS
NICOLAS DE OVANDO
JOSEFA BREA
ALBERT THOMAS
CAMINO MANDINGA
CARRETERA MENDOZA
AV. MAXIMO GÓMEZ
PEDRO LIVIO CEDENO
AVENIDA DUARTE
AVENIDA DEL PUERTO
Río Ozama
AV. VENEZUELA
CARRETERA MELLA
SAN VICENTE DE PAUL
AMERICO LUGO
CENTENARIO
LA CIÉNAGA
PRESIDENTE VAZQUEZ
AV. SAN MARTÍN
EXPRESSO V CENTENARIO
Parque Enriquillo
AVENIDA LAS AMÉRICAS
Centro Olímpico
AV. 27 DE FEBRERO
AV. 25 DE FEBRERO
Caribe Tours Bus Station
Mercado Modelo
PROL. MEXICO
VILLA DUARTE
AV. FARO A COLÓN
El Faro
Parque Mirador del Este
AV. LAS AMÉRICAS
DE FEBRERO
Terrabus Bus Station
AV. MELLA
AV. ESTADOS UNIDOS
Los Tres Ojos
Palacio Nacional
AV. ESPAÑA
CALLE 4TA
See 'Gazcue & The Malecón' map for detail
ZONA COLONIAL
Plaza de la Cultura
Parque Independencia
SANS SOUCI
AVENIDA BOLIVAR
GAZCUE
See 'Zona Colonial' map for detail
AVENIDA ESPAÑA
Acuario Nacional
Palacio de Bellas Artes
AVENIDA INDEPENDENCIA
AVENIDA GEORGE WASHINGTON (MALECON)
N
B
AVENIDA GEORGE WASHINGTON
CARIBBEAN SEA
A (11km), Las Américas Airport (13km) & Boca Chica (25km)

ACCOMMODATION	
El Embajador	C
Hilton Santo Domingo	B
Quality Hotel	A

EATING	
Alma Llanera	12
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Paraíso del Son	2
Paraíso Musical	1
Punto Corcho	6
Retro Café	7
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Driving a car is daunting given the chaotic nature of traffic in the capital and current mass construction along several major roads to accommodate the new subway, but if you're planning on taking a few day-trips it may be worthwhile to rent a car; expect to spend around US$60 per day, with rental agencies at the Las Américas airport and along Avenida Independencia in Gazcue. The **best thoroughfares** to take from one end of the city to the other are Avenida 27 de Febrero and

Avenida JFK; both roads have elevated freeways above them for large stretches that allow you to travel through the city express, with turn offs every few kilometres.

In general, though, **walking** is often the most convenient option in Santo Domingo, especially if you're restricting your exploration mostly to the Zona Colonial.

Accommodation

There's a wide variety of **accommodation** in the city, but budget rooms in decent neighbourhoods are hard to come by. Most expensive are the high-rises along the **Malecón**, which offer great rooms and decent service, though the restaurants attached are generally sub-par; prices here are typically US$50 cheaper on weekends, when there are fewer business travellers. Given the exorbitant rate at these hotels, you should demand a room with an ocean view; initial protestations that they're all booked are best treated with a dose of scepticism. If you've got this kind of budget, though, the smaller luxury pensiones tucked away in the **Zona Colonial**, some of them in sixteenth-century mansions, are really worth considering.

The Zona Colonial also has a few mid-range options, but keep in mind that they're set amid the centre of city activity and thus can get a bit noisy at night. If you want peace and quiet at a more reasonable rate, head to one of the small hotels in residential **Gazcue**, all of which come with hot water, TV and optional air conditioning. Be sure to see your bed before paying for it; room quality can vary widely within a single establishment. There are also plenty of less expensive, basic rooms available in the shopping district around Avenida Duarte, but that neighbourhood gets very dicey at night. Wherever you go, you may want to check that your hotel has a **generator** that provides power during the frequent city blackouts and that the management is willing to run it 24 hours a day.

Zona Colonial

The following places are shown on the map on p.59.

Aida El Conde 474 and Espaillat ⓣ685-7692. The only hotel with balcony rooms on El Conde and a good bargain for clean, simple accommodation, though the proprietors can be a bit gruff. You'll have to decide whether relaxing on your private balcony after a long day spent exploring, watching life pass by below you, is worth the lukewarm, low-pressure showers. ④

El Beaterio Duarte 8 ⓣ687-8657, ⓦwww.elbeaterio.com. Magnificently renovated sixteenth-century convent with beautiful rooms and a luxurious commons. New and now the nicest place in the Zona Colonial for under US$100. ⑥

Bettye's Guest House Isabela 163 ⓣ688-7649, ⓔbettyemarshall@hotmail.com. Dormitory beds in rooms with fan and shared hot-water bath, plus a couple of private rooms. If the guesthouse is full, you're put up in a cot within the owner's Haitian art gallery. A little expensive, although it's right in the centre of the Zona Colonial and breakfast is included. ③

Caribe Colonial Isabela 159 ⓣ688-7799, ⓦwww.hodelpa.com. A bit of an anomaly within the Zona Colonial, a modern hotel with nice but somewhat cramped rooms and eleven suites with balcony and hot tubs. Multilingual staff and 24hr room service, though the place is lacking in character and charm. Taxi service provided by a snazzy, remodelled 1950s Cadillac. ⑥

Coco Arz. Portes 7 ⓣ685-8467, ⓦwww.cocoboutiquehotel.com. Friendly little boutique hotel that features mellow electronica and mid-century furniture in the lobby, tucked away on a small neighborhood park that's quiet and yet just off the seaside boardwalk. The shared roof lounge and bar is an awesome place to chill out at night. ⑥

Conde de Penalba El Conde 111 and Meriño ⓣ688-7121, ⓦwww.condepenalba.com. A fair compromise between comfort and colonial character, this small hotel tucked away on the second floor of a century-old building on Parque Duarte boasts good service, comfortable rooms (a/c, cable TV, phone) and strong, hot showers. You pay for the location, though. ⑥

Discovery Nouel at Hincado on Parque Independencia ⓣ687-4048, ⓦwww.discoverygranhotel.com. A nice enough place with standard amenities and acceptable, nondescript rooms in a central location that's hard to beat. Best benefit is the rooftop bar and hot tub, but you can safely skip the restaurant and its nightly folkloric dance shows. ④

Doña Elvira Billini 207 ⓣ221-7415, ⓦwww.dona-elvira.com. Run by a friendly Belgian couple, this renovated sixteenth-century mansion has high ceilings with original mahogany beams, a courtyard swimming pool and a Turkish bath plunge pool. Rooms are simple and have internet access. ⑥

Europa Meriño and Tejera ⓣ285-0005, ⓦwww.europahotelboutique.com. Good value in this colonial-district traveller haunt, with snazzy rooms, fine service and modern amenities, including internet access in the lobby. Breakfast included. ⑤

Francés Mercedes 106 and Arz. Meriño ⓣ685-9331, ⓦwww.accor-hotels.com. Beautiful sixteenth-century building with deluxe rooms decorated with period furnishings. The hotel's best feature is the quiet, starlit courtyard. Amenities include cable TV, a/c, safe deposit box and phone – but don't use the latter for long-distance calls, as the rate here is even more exorbitant than usual for in-room calls. The attached *Le Patio* restaurant is pretty good but overpriced. ⑦

Nicolás de Ovando Las Damas and El Conde ⓣ685-9955, ⓦwww.accorhotels.com. High-priced luxury hotel in the former home of conquistador Nicolás de Ovando. Gorgeous rooms with authentic sixteenth-century decor offer all the modern amenities, including high-speed internet. Half the rooms have great river views, while the others overlook the colonial city – either way, you can't really lose and the service is the best around. A true respite from the bustling city. ⑧

Nicolás Nader Luperón 151 and Duarte ⓣ687-6674, ⓦwww.naderenterprises.com/hostal. A well-regarded, small, luxury hotel with ten spacious, tastefully decorated rooms (a bit nicer than those at the *Palacio*) in a limestone colonial-era mansion. Within the courtyard are a small art gallery, restaurant and bar. If you can afford it, this should be your first choice in the Zona Colonial. ⑥

Palacio Duarte 106 and Ureña ⓣ682-4730, ⓦwww.hotel-palacio.com. If you can't get into *Nicolás Nader*, this is almost as good – and unlike its nearby competitor, there's free parking. Formerly the residence of infamous *caudillo* Buenaventura Báez, this 1628 mansion has been very well maintained and boasts a dozen large, well-appointed rooms, quality service and all the amenities. It's a pleasure just to walk through the corridors here, with their ageing, massive limestone blocks lined with portraits of the island's first Spanish nobles. ⑥

Malecón and around

The following places are shown on the map on p.70.

La Casona Dorada Independencia 255 and Osvaldo Báez ⓣ221-3535. Set on quiet grounds away from the road, this refurbished nineteenth-century mansion has drab rooms but features a restaurant/bar, swimming pool, hot tub, efficient laundry service and free parking. Gay-friendly and a good price given the 24-hour security. ④

Hilton Santo Domingo Malecón 500 ⓣ685-0202, ⓦwww.hiltoncaribbean.com. Newly renovated and currently the nicest of the city's waterfront hotel options, with swish rooms, great service and views of endless ocean. Geared toward high-end business travellers, so they run this place extremely well. ⑦

Maison Gatreaux Llúberes 8 ⓣ412-7837, ⓦwww.maisongatreaux.net. Large, clean rooms come with a/c, comfortable beds and especially strong hot showers – far better than what you'll find at most mid-budget hotels, though the front desk is not especially friendly. US$2 extra for cable TV. ③

Melía Santo Domingo Malecón 365 ⓣ221-6666, ⓦwww.solmelia.com. This luxury establishment has spacious, modern rooms and boasts a shopping arcade, casino, three restaurants, swimming pool, hot tub and a high-profile disco. Service here is spotty at times, but the excellent rooms come with cable TV, a/c, coffeemaker and phone. ⑦

El Napolitano Malecón 51 ⓣ687-0163, ⓦwww.hotelnapolitano.net. A bargain given the rates at the other Malecón high-rises. It looks a bit shabbier on the outside but the seventy or so modern rooms do compete with the expensive seafront hotels. The swimming pool has views of the Caribbean and the casino is open 4pm–4am. The disco here is one of the most popular in the city, but the rooms are insulated from the noise. ⑤

Renaissance Jaragua Malecón 367 ⓣ221-2222, ⓦwww.marriott.com. This massive complex is the best of the row of Malecón hotels just west of the colonial city, with big, tasteful rooms with all the amenities and excellent service. On the grounds you'll find a popular disco, four restaurants, a bar, swimming pool, hot tub and a tropical garden. ⑦

Gazcue

The following places are shown on the map on p.70.

Felicidad Aristides Cabrar 58 ⓣ221-6615. Small pensión with five basic, clean rooms (two with a/c), private bath and hot water. The interior is not particularly attractive but the residential block is quiet and pretty. ①

La Grand Mansión Danae 26 ⓣ689-8758. Unpretentious and functional on a quiet residential street, with private hot-water bath, fan, free coffee and clean rooms. Ask for a second-floor room with a window view of the trees; a/c for US$2.50 extra. ②

Hospidaje Tu Espacio Cervantes 102 ⓣ688-4100. Comfy rooms in a local home, with private cold-water bath and fan. Worth a look if *La Grand Mansión* is booked up. ③

La Mansión Dr Báez 1 and Bolivar ⓣ686-5562. Also called *Hostal Primaveral*, this basic place is popular with backpackers, thus making for a convivial spot to meet fellow travellers. Rooms are unremarkable, as is the on-site Italian restaurant. ②

La Residencia Danae 62 ⓣ412-7298, ⓦwww.hotelresidencia.com. Clean rooms with private bath, a/c, cable TV and hot water. Nice proprietors make it a pleasant place to stay, though there's little to do in the immediate area. Most guests are Dominican travellers. ③

Venezia Independencia 45 ⓣ682-5108, ⓦwww.residence-venezia.com. Quiet little motel just a couple of blocks from Parque Independencia, with clean rooms, good security and pretty grounds. Especially good for groups of three for the two triple-occupancy rooms with kitchenettes. Amenities include phone, satellite TV and minibar. ④

The outer barrios

The following places are shown on the map on p.55.

El Embajador Sarasota 65 ⓣ221-2131, ⓦwww.occidental-hoteles.com. A grand hotel with a great deal of history (it was where American troops bunkered down during the invasion of 1965), this is the best of the upmarket hotels in the capital, but is unfortunately quite far from the action – come here only if you have your own rental car. Set a bit off the Malecón but high enough that many rooms offer ocean views from their terraces. The gorgeous grounds include gardens, tennis courts and a great swimming pool. ⑦

Quality Hotel Carretera Las Américas, 2km west of the airport ⓣ549-2525, ⓦwww.qualityinn.com. The best place to spend the night before getting up for an early flight from the Santo Domingo airport. Good chain-style rooms with comfort and modern amenities, used primarily by foreign executives heading in and out of town. ⑥

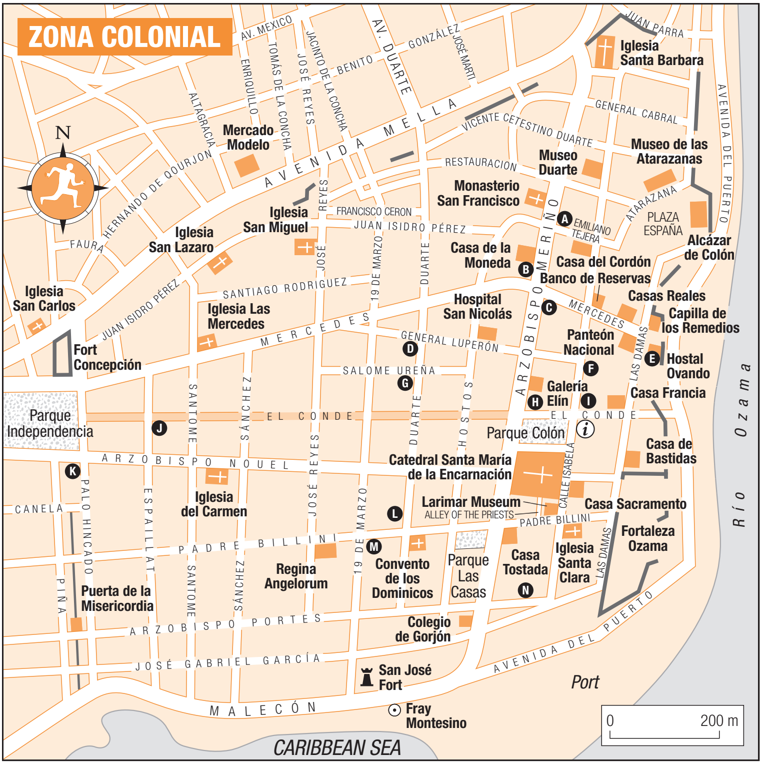
The City

At the beginning of the twentieth century Santo Domingo didn't extend much beyond the Zona Colonial, but a hundred years of heavy rural migration have seen it explode in three directions. Today no single barrio could be called "downtown" Santo Domingo, as government and corporate headquarters are spread fairly evenly throughout the sprawl. That said, the **Zona Colonial**, **Gazcue** and the **Malecón** – a compact trio of barrios – are the natural base for visitors. **Parque Independencia** separates the first two and is a mere four blocks from the third; radiating out from the park are avenidas Independencia and Bolívar, major arteries that pass through much of the city beyond this tourist zone.

The Zona Colonial

> **"Its buildings are as tall and beautiful as those in Italy and its streets, wide and straight, are far superior to those of Florence."**
>
> Spanish Bishop Geraldini, on his arrival in 1525

The **Zona Colonial** – a square-shaped district straddling the western mouth of the Río Ozama and encircled by the ruins of the original city walls – is crammed with monumental architecture, and yet it's very much a living neighbourhood, thanks to the trendy cafés, local bars and rows of clapboard houses where thousands of people live and work. A multimillion-dollar renovation, begun in the 1970s in preparation for the Columbus Centenary, has brought a number of the historic buildings back to their original state, giving you a real sense of how the city looked when first developed and the piecemeal renovation continues as new businesses occupy the


ZONA COLONIAL
N
AV. MEXICO
ENRIQUILLO
TOMÁS DE LA CONCHA
JOSÉ REYES
JACINTO DE LA CONCHA
AV. DUARTE
BENITO
GONZÁLEZ
JOSÉ MARTÍ
JUAN PARRA
Iglesia Santa Barbara
ALTAGRACIA
Mercado Modelo
AVENIDA MELLA
VICENTE CETESTINO DUARTE
GENERAL CABRAL
AVENIDA DEL PUERTO
HERNANDO DE GOURJON
RESTAURACION
Museo Duarte
Museo de las Atarazanas
REYES
Iglesia San Miguel
FRANCISCO CERON
Monasterio San Francisco
ATARAZANA
PLAZA ESPAÑA
FAURA
Iglesia San Lazaro
JUAN ISIDRO PÉREZ
EMILIANO TEJERA
Alcázar de Colón
JOSÉ
19 DE MARZO
DUARTE
Casa de la Moneda
Casa del Cordón
Banco de Reservas
Iglesia San Carlos
JUAN ISIDRO PÉREZ
SANTIAGO RODRIGUEZ
Iglesia Las Mercedes
Hospital San Nicolás
MERCEDES
Casas Reales
Capilla de los Remedios
Fort Concepción
GENERAL LUPERÓN
ARZOBISPO MERIÑO
Panteón Nacional
LAS DAMAS
Hostal Ovando
SALOME UREÑA
Galería Elín
Casa Francia
Parque Independencia
SANTOME
SÁNCHEZ
EL CONDE
HOSTOS
Parque Colón
Río Ozama
ARZOBISPO NOUEL
Casa de Bastidas
Catedral Santa María de la Encarnación
CALLE ISABELA
CANELA
PALO HINCADO
ESPAILLAT
Iglesia del Carmen
JOSÉ REYES
19 DE MARZO
Larimar Museum
ALLEY OF THE PRIESTS
Casa Sacramento
PADRE BILLINI
Fortaleza Ozama
PADRE BILLINI
Regina Angelorum
Convento de los Dominicos
Parque Las Casas
Casa Tostada
Iglesia Santa Clara
LAS DAMAS
PIÑA
Puerta de la Misericordia
SANTOME
SÁNCHEZ
ARZOBISPO PORTES
Colegio de Gorjón
JOSÉ GABRIEL GARCÍA
San José Fort
AVENIDA DEL PUERTO
Port
MALECÓN
Fray Montesino
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CARIBBEAN SEA
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ACCOMMODATION

Aida	J	Bettye's Guest House	F	Conde de Penalba	H	Francés	C	Palacio	G
Europa	A	Colonial	I	Discovery	K	Nicolás de Ovando	E	El Refugio	B
El Beaterio	L	Coco's	N	Doña Elvira	M	Nicolás Nader	D		

stone mansions and set up shop. Many of the important monuments can be seen in a single day if you keep to a brisk pace, although thorough exploration requires at least two or three. Chances are that you'll pass through the district nearly every day while in town, since it holds many of the city's best restaurants and bars. Wandering about you'll no doubt be accosted by freelance guides, who are generally very friendly and sometimes quite knowledgeable; if you tell them you don't want assistance (*no gracias*) they'll leave you in peace.

The town gates

A good place to begin exploring the old city is at the massive **Puerta de la Misericordia** (Gate of Mercy), an early sixteenth-century fortified city entrance on the corner of Hincado and Arzobispo Portes, just north of the Malecón. Connected to it from the south are the rubble remains of its watchtower, the San Gil Fort. The gate earned its name during the devastating earthquake of 1842, when local priests erected a tent city beneath it to treat the sick and shelter the homeless. Two years later, on February 27, 1844, freedom fighter Ramón Mella made a dramatic speech here inciting the city to insurrection and fired off the first shot of the revolution against Haiti. A re-enactment of the event is staged every Independence Day.

Follow Mella's torchlit route up Hincado to Calle El Conde and the **Puerta El Conde** (Gate of the Count), an imposing stone structure adorned with a decorative, red-brick belfry, where Mella raised the new national flag for the first time. Named for Count Bernado Bracamonte – whose military tactics saved the city from British invasion in 1655 – the gate leads into beautiful **Parque Independencia**, a popular meeting place encircled by a traffic-choked ring road, with shaded benches and a stone slab that serves as a marker from which all distances in the capital are calculated. Near the park's centre is the honour-guarded **Altar de la Patria** (daily 8.30am–6pm; no shorts or short skirts; free), a marble mausoleum in which Mella is buried beside his compatriots Duarte and Sánchez. At the north end of the park, look for the fenced-off, fortified ramp that leads to the **Fort Concepción** (1678), just beyond the park boundaries, a pentagonal cannon platform with tremendous limestone walls. From here it's just a short walk north up 16 de Agosto to **Iglesia San Carlos** (16 de Agosto and Trinitaria), a pentagonal church built in 1715 with a pretty white facade. Its thick, fortress-like walls allowed it to double in the early days as a military outpost in times of crisis.

Parque Colón and around

Calle El Conde, stretching east from Parque Independencia, was once Santo Domingo's main thoroughfare but was closed off to motorized traffic in the 1970s and is now a broad pedestrian boulevard lined with cafés, fast-food restaurants, clothing shops and bookstores. It's an ideal place to people watch, with hundreds of city-dwellers passing through at all hours, locals playing chess and sidewalk vendors selling everything from pirated CDs to split coconuts. Follow the promenade eight blocks to Calle Arz Meriño, where **Parque Colón**, a pleasant open space surrounded by beautiful colonial and Victorian buildings, holds a statue of Columbus in its centre – heroically staring out towards the horizon with an adoring, topless Taino maiden at his feet. The park is largely given over to tourism these days, as signalled by the *Hard Rock Café* on its northern end, but it's still a remarkably pleasant place to hang out.

At the west end of the park is the Victorian-style nineteenth-century town hall, no longer the seat of city government but still used for municipal office space, while to the north sits a series of cigar and souvenir shops, including the **Museo de Ámbar**, El Conde 107 (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm; RD$30 museum entry), a high-end jewellery store with a small museum on the second floor featuring ants, termites, wasps and other insects trapped in amber. On the park's east side are **Casa de Abogados**, the old town jail, and **Palacio Borghella**, early nineteenth-century buildings constructed by the Haitians. Borghella was once especially beautiful, but Hurricane Georges destroyed its stunning facade in 1998. For more contemporary signs of Haitian culture, don't miss the incredible Haitian art on display at the no-frills **Galería Elín**, just off the park and El Conde on Meriño 203 (daily 9am–6pm; ⓣ688-7100). The gallery has heaps of paintings of varying quality; if you browse a bit you'll uncover some outstanding finds, including top Haitian artists in modest surroundings, many of the works stacked up in rows along the walls. Don't let the presentation fool you – a walk through the shop will give you an encyclopedic survey of the history of Haitian art and the paintings here cost less than half what they would in the States or Western Europe.

The Basílica Catedral Santa María de la Encarnación

Most imposing of the buildings along the park is the **Basílica Catedral Santa María de la Encarnación** (daily 9am–4.30pm; no shorts or short skirts, no trousers allowed for women; skirts can be rented from nearby souvenir shops for RD$50), intended, when constructed by the Vatican, to be the religious centre of the West Indies and the base for proselytizing all the indigenous peoples of the Americas. It also played a formative role in the birth of New World Voodoo; in the sixteenth century various Spanish religious brotherhoods called *cofradías* – an Iberian institution since the Middle Ages – used the cathedral for their patron-saint parades. The imported slaves had their own *cofradías* (in which West African god Chango was worshipped under the guise of Christian St John), which would hold religious processions involving traditional drum music, dancing and possession. As the century wore on, the clergy realized that the African *cofradías* were incorporating some distinctly unorthodox practices and banished them to the churches along the city's northern wall.

Built between 1521 and 1540, only the fortifed **northern facade** bears the traces of the cathedral's Gothic roots in the minimalist stud ornaments around the windows. The **western facade** is instead Plateresque, a style that predominated in Santo Domingo during the reign of Diego Columbus, with an overabundance of friezes and fanciful ornamentation, such as the allegorical frieze above the portals, showing a flight of cherubs making their way past horse-headed sea creatures and impious women – meant to symbolize the ocean journey of the colonists. The original mahogany doors remain intact and priests still use the same 500-year-old key to lock them at night. The gold Habsburg seal and statuary that surrounded the portals, though, were stolen by Sir Francis Drake – the current ones are modest reproductions. Look around to the right and you'll see the cathedral's exposed bell tower; the original covering was demolished by Drake (who turned the church into a barracks during his stay) and never replaced.

Inside, under a Gothic ribbed vault, a few items bear noting, including a seventeenth-century marble altar and a sixteenth-century altar, pulpit and pews of mahogany. Beneath the marble floor an underground tunnel, now sealed off, led to the archbishop's palace across the street. Just to the right of the pulpit, one of the thirteen church chapels, **Santa Ana**, bears the tomb of colonial administrator Rodrigo de Bastidas and the only surviving original stained-glass window, an angel hovering over Virgin and Child. Beside it the **Chapel of Life and Death**, where baptism and extreme unction are performed, has a Rincón Mora window – reminiscent of Chagall – showing a deranged-looking John the Baptist baptizing a clean-shaven Christ. Continuing down the southern wall, the **Chapel of the Apostles** holds an original mural on its 1556 vault, a beautiful mahogany altar with a silver retable and the grave of Royal Secretary Diego Caballero. On the northern wall you'll find the **Chapel of the Virgin of Antigua**, with its gorgeous groined vault and a beautiful 1520 painting of Mary, shipped to Spain by Santana upon annexation and returned in terrible shape in 1892 (it's since been restored); the **Chapel of the Virgin of the Light**, where Columbus was interred for a time; and the **Chapel of Christ in Agony**, where two stone lions stand guard over the grave of Santo Domingo's first bishop, Alejandro Geraldini.

Pass through the cathedral's southern door and you'll enter the enclosed **Plaza of the Priests**; it was once the city cemetery, but Drake burned the cathedral's records and now no one knows who was buried here. Across the plaza, the **Alley of the Priests**, an attractive walkway lined with bougainvillea, leads past the old priests' quarters; note the decorative Islamic brick arches over the doorways.

East of the cathedral

Exiting onto the street from the Alley of the Priests, it's just a half-block east to the largely unadorned **Iglesia Santa Clara** on Billini and Isabela la Católica, the New World's first nunnery, built in 1552. The Catholic primary school that's here now is not technically open to the public, but the nuns will let you wander in to see the chapel on the grounds, its single nave supported by five Gothic arches.

Just north of the nunnery on Calle Isabela and Alfau is another important relic owned by the Church, the peach-coloured **Casa Sacramento** (House of the Sacrament), built in 1520 by Diego Caballero and now the residence of the archbishop. Legend ascribes the building's name to an apocryphal sixteenth-century event in which the owner purchased a large orangutan from a passing merchant. The animal somehow got loose in the courtyard and threatened to hurl an infant off the roof until the baby's mother began repeating the rosary, upon which the primate put the child down and went to sleep. Renovations in the 1930s disguised its colonial bulk in a decorative Victorian wrap. You can walk through the two connecting courtyard gardens, or up to the viewing platforms of the towers, which offer scenic rooftop views of the neighbourhood.

Across the street from Casa Sacramento at Isabela 54 is the **Museo Larimar Dominicano** (Mon–Sat 8am–6pm, Sun 8am–2pm; free; Ⓣ689-6605, Ⓦwww.larimarmuseum.com), a remodelled house from the late 1700s holding a variety of exhibits on larimar, a turquoise-coloured stone that exists only in the Dominican Republic. In addition to a number of particularly beautiful examples of raw larimar as it is mined from the Bahoruco Mountains, the museum shows how the semiprecious gem was created by local volcanic activity, how it is mined, a number of leaf and wood fossils embedded within it and some pieces of art that incorporate it. You'll also find out how to tell real from fake larimar and there's, of course, a very nice jewellery shop on the ground floor. The exhibits have English captions and the staff are helpful and unobtrusive.

West of the cathedral

Heading west from the entrance to the Alley of the Priests, you will reach **Plaza Padre Billini**, at the corner of Billini and Meriño, within half a block. A small public plaza backed by a row of expensive antique, jewellery and clothing shops, it's named for a seventeenth-century priest who championed the poor; before Padre Billini's time the square was used to stage bullfights. **Casa Tostado**, on the plaza's southeast corner, was built in 1503 by scrivener Francisco Tostado, whose son was later killed by a Drake cannonball. The exterior's most notable feature is the Gothic double window above the front door, the only one of its kind in this hemisphere. Inside you'll find the **Museum of the Nineteenth-Century Dominican Family** (Mon–Sat 9am–4pm; RD$40; Ⓣ689-5000), featuring a number of attractive (if unspectacular) antique furnishings, some Art Nouveau. Check out the geometric Mudéjar tiling on the courtyard well and ask to climb the circular mahogany staircase that leads to the roof. Across the street, the sixteenth-century walls of the old Archbishop's Palace today enclose a car park and **Parque Las Casas**, named for the priest who petitioned the Crown on behalf of the Tainos; a statue of him stands in its centre, a single clenched fist and a skull-like head protruding from the bulk of his robe.

A block south at the corner of Meriño and García, the sixteenth-century **Colegio de Gorjón** served as the New World's second university (after San Tomé de Aquino; see p.66). Like all early colonial structures, the stonework was originally exposed, but in 1712 – under a misconception that the plague was transmitted through bare masonry – Philip V decreed that all buildings in the empire be plastered; this building is a beautifully whitewashed example. Check out as well the stunning courtyard on Calle García, with a delightful ocean view.

Calle de las Damas

A block east of the cathedral runs **Calle de las Damas** (Street of the Ladies), the first road laid out by Ovando when he moved the town to this side of the river. The street received its name in 1509, thanks to the retinue of women who would accompany Diego Columbus's wife María de Toledo down it to church every Sunday morning; their proximity to María reflected their standing in the city's social hierarchy. Today it's traversed mostly by tourists who come for a look at the early sixteenth-century mansions lining the cobblestone blocks.

Fortaleza Ozama

On the street's southern end, **Fortaleza Ozama** (Mon–Sat 9.30am–6pm, Sun 10am–4pm; RD$40), where Diego and María lived while their palace was under construction, was long Santo Domingo's most strategic site. Built in 1502 and enlarged over the centuries, it's set on a steep bank over the mouth of the Ozama and was the departure point for the Spanish conquests of Cuba, Colombia, Jamaica, Peru and Mexico – finally decommissioned after the American invasion of 1965. Beyond the Neoclassical main gate, the courtyard features a statue (with definite shades of Rodin) of González Oviedo, author of the first *History of the Indies* and commander of the fort from 1533 to 1557. The largest structure is the bulky medieval **Torre de Homenaje** (Tower of Homage), the most impenetrable part of the fortress and used for centuries as a prison. Climb to the top for panoramic views, or head inside where you'll find the hole through which prisoners were dropped to their cell. Also on the grounds are the old **arsenal** (with a niche bearing an icon of Santa Bárbara, patron of the military), the excavated remains of the provisional fort from 1502 and the intact wall of Fort Santiago, the first line of defence.

Casa de Bastidas

Sharing the fort's northern wall is **Casa de Bastidas**, built around 1510 by Bishop Rodrigo Bastidas, who was the king's tax collector and went on to colonize Colombia. Since then the house has been associated with the fort, often serving as an officers' residence; the seventeenth-century statue of Santa Bárbara above the main entrance signifies its link with the military. These days it serves as a children's science museum, the **Parque Infantil Trampolin** (Tues–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat & Sun 10am–6pm; RD$60 children, RD$100 adults; Ⓦwww.trampolin.org.do), with a planetarium and exhibits on geography, paleontology, energy, ecology and social sciences. All in all, it's a great place for kids, but exhibits are in Spanish only.

Casa Francia

Across the street you'll pass two more restored colonial buildings, **Sociedad de Bibliofilios** and the **Academia de las Ciencias** – both with lush courtyard gardens behind their thick stone facades – before arriving at **Casa Francia** (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm; free), originally the home of conquistador Hernán Cortes. It was here that he plotted his conquest of Mexico; you'll find his family's coat of arms in the second gallery. Note the parallel organization of arches on the arcades, a departure from Spanish architectural tradition that was copied by later colonial houses. Opposite, **Hotel Nicolás de Ovando** incorporates the homes of the Ovando and Davila families, both prominent in the early colony. The hotel, which you can explore during the day (and where you can stay in luxury at night; see p.57), is decorated with sixteenth-century furniture and a collection of medieval illuminated religious manuscripts illustrated in gold leaf and so gives a good sense of colonial private life. Don't miss the double riverfront patio in the back, or the Davila coat of arms flanked by two griffins at the northernmost entrance. Attached to the hotel's north wall is **Capilla de los Remedios**, once the Davilas' private chapel, with an especially pretty triple-arched belfry atop its brick facade.

Plaza María Toledo

The hotel looks directly across at **Plaza María Toledo** – a broad walkway with a sixteenth-century fountain – and the **Panteón Nacional** (Tues–Sun 9am–5pm, Mon 2–5pm; free), built from 1714 to 1745 as a Jesuit convent, not long before they were expelled from the colonies. Today it's a nationalist monument where most of the major military and political figures from Dominican history are interred. The building's Neoclassical, martial facade seems particularly suited to its sober task, topped with a prominent cupola flanked by statues of Loyola and Jesus. The interior has been completely redone, with Italian marble floors, an enormous central chandelier donated by Spanish dictator Franco and a massive central mausoleum. The serenity and patriotic uniformity of the elevated marble caskets around a large eternal flame is at odds with the competing *caudillos*' legacies. Nineteenth-century dictator Pedro Santana, for example, is surrounded by his enemies (and successors) Pepillo Salcedo, Gaspar Polanco, Pedro Antonio Pimentel, José María Cabral and Gregorio Luperón, each of whom briefly served as president before being deposed by the next.

Beside the Panteón is **Casa de los Jesuitas**, built in 1508 by Diego Caballero's brother Hernán and taken over in 1701 by the Jesuits, who turned it into a renowned school of rhetoric; now it holds the administrative offices of the Museo de las Casas Reales (see p.64). Check out the beautiful Islamic portal in the courtyard. Another Jesuit property, **Casa de las Gárgolas**, sits adjacent, named for the prominent row of five grimacing gargoyles above the front door. Their state of decay is due in part to the vagaries of time and in part to a seventeenth-century incident in which they were pelted with stones by a mob, who believed them supernaturally responsible for a series of local murders. One door over **Casa Viloria**, built by the king's chamberlain Juan de Viloria in 1520, continues the supernatural theme, supposedly haunted by Viloria's ghost. Some locals claim that Viloria still appears one night a year and offers to reveal the location of his buried treasure to anyone willing to follow; apparently enough folks took up this offer to dig several holes in the courtyard's tile floor, found when work was begun on the house's restoration.

Plaza España

Calle de las Damas ends at **Plaza España**, an attractive, tiled open space with terrific views across the river, which you can enjoy from one of its many breezy outdoor cafés. This was the centre of colonial power and commerce, with sailors disembarking from the adjoining port, foreign merchants auctioning slaves and Spain's high officials administering their empire from the Casas Reales. An intact section of the old town wall still skirts the eastern plaza, extending to **Puerta San Diego**, the colonial-era entrance from the port. More decorative than functionally defensive, at night its arcades are a favourite local hangout; on its eastern face you'll find the excavated foundations of the colony's arrow-shaped, riverfront fort. At the centre a statue of Ovando stands on the previous site of an enormous pillar that was to support an aqueduct from the Río Haina (the Ozama's water being too brackish to drink).

At the southern end of the plaza, **Museo de las Casas Reales** (daily 8.30am–5pm; RD$20; ☎682-4202), built between 1503 and 1520, was the administrative centre of the West Indies, housing the Royal Court, Treasury and Office of the Governor. Opposite the entrance, an eighteenth-century sundial sits on a pedestal, positioned so bureaucrats could tell the time by simply looking out the window. The museum's ground-floor collection is a bit of a hotchpotch, with a few Taino artefacts and Spanish navigational instruments. Near the back you'll find a rickshaw, in which Spanish judges were carried to court by Tainos, and a sixteenth-century apothecary crammed with colourful glass vials. The floor above is more coherent, holding an armoury donated by Trujillo with examples of weaponry used here since the time of Columbus.

Opposite the Casas Reales is the **Alcázar de Colón** (Tues–Sat 9am–5pm, Sun 9am–4pm; RD$50), the fortified palace of the Columbus family, built by Diego from 1511 to 1515 without the use of a single nail. He chose the site because of its easy proximity to the Casas Reales, where he conducted official business, and so that it would be the first building seen by disembarking sailors and merchants. Also, from its terrace he could look across the Ozama and see the remains of the wooden colony his father Christopher had built. These grounds would also decay, hastened by the family's departure for Spain in 1577; a nineteenth-century illustration by American traveller Samuel Hazard depicts it scarred, overgrown with weeds and fronted by two thatch huts. You'd never know it today – the portal's flattened arches, framed by rectangular panels, are pristine. They're also the finest local example of the late Gothic style called **Isabelline**, characterized by plain, linear surfaces adorned only with Islamic portals and delicate vine ornaments.

Inside, a **museum** assembles an array of sixteenth-century pieces, evocative of the life of early Spanish nobility. Reproductions of the stone gargoyles that held up the first-floor ceiling leer down at the collection of mahogany furniture, religious tapestries and period silverware. A narrow, circular stone staircase leads to the second floor, where the private study showcases illuminated manuscripts from Spain and the music salon holds a sixteenth-century harp and clavichord. From the second floor, you can walk to the terrace fortifications, the construction of which led Spanish officials to fear Diego intended to barricade his followers inside and declare himself "Emperor of the Americas".

North of Plaza España

Bordering the Alcázar to the north is a winding row of colonial storefronts known as **Las Atarazanas**. In the old days they held taverns frequented by passing mariners and the city's large public market, where ships stocked up on tropical fruit to combat scurvy. Follow it to the end where the Reales Atarazanas, once the port authority, contains the **Museo de las Atarazanas**, Colón 4 (daily 9am–5pm; RD$50; ⓣ682-5834). The museum holds the recovered booty from the wreck of the sixteenth-century Spanish galleon *Concepción*, sunk during a hurricane in the Bahía de Samaná. In addition to a lucid history of the wreck and four centuries' worth of attempts to salvage the considerable treasures it held, its one large room contains coins and bars of silver, pottery, chinaware and a variety of religious items, including dozens of small "poop" dolls that sailors stuffed with straw and the hair of a loved one from home, then hung along the ship's outer deck to stave off bad luck, giving rise to the term "poop deck".

West of Plaza España

One block west of the plaza, on Tejera and Isabela la Católica, sits Isabelline **Casa del Cordón**, built in 1502 as the home of Francisco de Garay (later a founder of Spanish Jamaica). Named for its portal – which has beautiful arabesque ornamentation and a giant, stone monk's belt from the Franciscan order hanging above it in imitation of an *arraba* (an Islamic rectangular portal frame) – it's now used as office space for Banco Popular, but the courtyard with its Mudéjar-tiled staircase is open to visitors during the day.

Just one block west of here, the more appealing **Museo Mundo de Ámbar** at Meriño 452 and Restauración (Mon–Sat 9am–6pm, Sun 9am–2pm; free; ⓣ682-3309, ⓦwww.amberworldmuseum.com) is based on the popular amber museum in Puerto Plata (see p.171). Inside is a nice little exhibit on the origins of amber, a set of Triassic-era insects trapped in the translucent goo and a gift shop with a generous sampling of amber jewellery.

The Art Deco **Banco de Reservas**, on Isabela 201 and Mercedes (Mon–Fri 8am–4pm; free), is worth a visit for the social-realist mural *Moneda* displayed in its lobby. It's the work of **José Vela Zanetti**, an anarchist exile of the Spanish Civil War who lived and worked in the Zona Colonial during the 1940s and 1950s, gleefully tattooing subversive, anti-capitalist statements on the many public commissions he received. Here labourers slaving in factories and fields surround a heroic figure stolidly grasping a gold coin. One block west at Meriño 358, **Casa de la Moneda** sports the city's most beautiful Plateresque portal frieze, on which five faces peer from separate medallions, thought to represent the five stages of a man's life.

The atmospheric ruins of the **Monasterio San Francisco** lie a little further on, where Tejera ends at Calle Hostos. Begun in 1544 when the Catholic Church was transforming Santo Domingo into the religious capital of the hemisphere, the Franciscan monastery weathered an artillery assault from Sir Francis Drake and the brunt of several earthquakes, which levelled the main building and the original chapel adjacent to it. Above the entrance are the curling stone belt of the Franciscan order and a Renaissance bust of Bishop Geraldini, who oversaw its initial construction. The Gothic portal below leads to the **Chapel of the Third Order**, built in 1704 after the original was flattened; the Third Order was an organization of spiritual laymen who followed the Franciscan lifestyle. The coral-pink arcade opens onto the cloisters and the monastery church – a popular spot for local weddings. All that's left of the main building are the foundations and a few mounds of rubble. It was used as a lunatic asylum through the nineteenth century; at points along the walls you'll see the metal studs that once held inmates' leg chains.

Two blocks south on Hostos, not much remains of the **Hospital San Nicolás**, built in 1503 and mostly torn down in 1911 after being devastated by a hurricane. The most impressive feature left in the pigeon-haunted ruins is the two-storey portal with Renaissance pillars on the ground floor and a tremendous Gothic arch on the top. The Victorian **Iglesia Altagracia** beside it – associated locally with miraculous healing – incorporates the hospital's eighteenth-century chapel. Within it you'll find a life-size statue of **Dr José Gregorio Hernández**, a Venezuelan medical doctor from the 1930s, worshipped throughout Latin America as a saint who performs operations on believers while they sleep. Opposite the hospital, the Italian cultural centre at **Casa Italia** was once the home of nineteenth-century General Pedro Santana, who sold the country back to Spain; when nationalist guerrillas threw the Spaniards out, the general shot himself here to avoid facing trial.

Convento de los Dominicos and around

Just south of El Conde are three ancient churches worth a detour. The oldest is the 1510 **Convento de los Dominicos**, Billini and Hostos (services held Mon–Fri 7–9am, 5.30–7pm, Sun hourly 7.30am–noon, 7–8pm; doors open 30min before), which held the New World's first university, San Tomé de Aquino. Its striking stone facade is framed by decorative two-dimensional pillars; blue Mudéjar tiling runs along the top of the portal and a profusion of red Isabelline vine ornamentation surrounds the circular window in the centre. Inside, on the vault of the sanctuary's Chapel of the Rosary (the first chapel to the right of the entrance) you'll find an impressive reminder that European Christianity was a syncretic religion long before it came to the New World: an enormous pagan **zodiac wheel** is guarded by Jupiter (spring), Mars (summer), Mercury (autumn) and Saturn (winter), each identified not only with a season but as one of the gospel authors as well. Though there were once many such syncretic church illustrations in Europe, most were destroyed during the Counter-Reformation. The simple but attractive **Chapel of the Third Dominican Order** across the plaza once held the studies of famed Taino apologists Las Casas and Montesino. In colonial times the cobblestone path between them was known as the Street of the Cobblers, home to the city's shoemakers.

A block west on Billini and José Reyes is nunnery **Regina Angelorum** (Queen of the Angels), a monumental piece of architecture with huge external buttressing, decaying gargoyles and a sombre stone facade that took nearly a century to build. Knock on the caretaker's door in the back to have a peek inside, where you'll find a Baroque eighteenth-century altar with a stunning silver retable and the marble grave of Padre Francisco Billini at the front of the sanctuary.

Smaller but far prettier is nearby **Iglesia del Carmen**, Arz. Nouel and San Tomé, once the secret meeting place of the Trinitarian rebels. Its facade boasts a decorative Isabelline red-brick portal topped by a fanciful Islamic peak and a niche holding a statuette of the Virgin. Erected as a neighbourhood church in the 1590s (after Drake burned down the original), the building manages to retain a cohesive look despite numerous renovations made over the centuries, such as the addition of the **Capilla San Andrés** and the philanthropic **Hospital Padre Billini** in the seventeenth. The life-size wooden statue of Christ above the chapel's intricately patterned mahogany altar is brought out every Ash Wednesday and paraded through the streets, a tradition that began in 1630.

Santa Bárbara and the northern wall

The old northern wall that marks the edge of the Zona Colonial holds a number of lovely churches worth a peek, though the run-down barrio alongside is equally interesting. In the sixteenth century this was the city slum, populated by subsistence farmers and stone-cutters who laboured alongside natives in the Santa Bárbara limestone quarry just north of **Iglesia Santa Bárbara**, Isabela la Católica and Puello (daily 8.30am–7pm), a handsome whitewashed church that honours the military's patron saint. Behind it are the remains of the **Santa Bárbara Fort**, to which the church was once attached and a large chunk of the old city wall, mostly in ruins – what's left has been converted into a neighbourhood park. Ostensibly part of the city's riverfront defences, the garrison was used mostly to keep the Taino (and later African) slaves in line as they laboured in the quarry – which has long since been paved over and is now the city's shabby shopping district.

Walk 10min west through a pretty residential area, to the corner of José Reyes and Isidro Pérez, where **Iglesia San Miguel** (daily 8.30am–4pm), a small seventeenth-century chapel, faces a park with an enormous pigeon coop. The old priests' quarters beside the church are used as private apartments; the fort that once stood across the street is in rubble. In the 1650s Spain ordered that San Miguel was to become a hospital for slaves, but local administrators ignored the decree. Further west lies **Iglesia San Lazaro** (daily 8.30am–2.30pm), at the corner of Isidro Pérez and San Tomé, which served as a hospital for lepers. A bad nineteenth-century plaster job has defaced the red-brick facade, but the Tuscan columns and triple-arched belfry are still intact. More impressive is Gothic **Iglesia Las Mercedes**, a short walk south at José Reyes and Mercedes, its mahogany altar carved in the shape of a serpent. Built in the 1530s, the church was used during Haitian rule to house six thousand African-American immigrants who were eventually shipped off to Puerto Plata and Samaná.

Dominican syncretism

Syncretic religion – the mixing of European and African religions in South America and the Caribbean – is very much a part of Dominican culture, though Eurocentrism and official disfavour make it an object of shame. Cousin to Haitian Voodoo, it came about during the colonial era, when European Christianity was imposed on African slaves from the Congo and West Africa; the slaves mixed Catholicism, along with elements from European paganism, freemasonry and Taino religion, with their own belief system. Over time, various Christian saints came to be linked to deities imported from Africa, allowing the slaves to practise their religion in peace. St Patrick, for example, was the equivalent of Damballa, a powerful Dominican *Vodú* deity, because both were associated with snakes; St Elias was identified with Samedi, guardian of the cemetery; while St John the Baptist's association with water has connected him to Chango, Dahomeyan god of the ocean, lightning and tempests.

Practising Dominicans are often unaware (and are offended at the suggestion) of their religion's African roots and the unorthodoxy of some of its rituals. With them a distinction is made between *Santera* and *Vodú*, categories that correspond roughly to the Haitian *Rada* and *Petwo* classes of spirit – the *Rada* are benevolent but less powerful, while the *Petwo* are stronger but amoral and mercenary and require specific sacrifices for their interventions. Known in the DR as the **misterios**, the *Petwo* adherents are a select few who have some sort of transcendent religious experience in which they're forcibly "called" into service by their patron spirit. Rural groups also worship Taino spirits thought to inhabit caves, pools and streams, leaving offerings of food and flowers at their holy sites. Though largely attributed to Haitian influence, Dominican *Vodú* was practised in the early sixteenth century and thus actually predates Voodoo.

Vodú practice involves private ceremonies using large altars covered with depictions of saints, offertory candles, plastic cups of rum and numerous crosses honouring the **gedes**, bawdy cemetery spirits known to spout lascivious songs when they possess humans. **Possession** is an integral part of *Vodú* ceremonies, both by saints and the spirits of dead Taino warriors. You'll see *Vodú* paraphernalia, including love potions, spray cans that impart good luck in the lottery and Catholic icons at the many *botánicas* throughout the country. For more intractable problems, followers will

The Malecón

The capital's famous oceanfront promenade, known as both the **Malecón** and Avenida George Washington, is best enjoyed on Sundays, when all motorized vehicles are banned and it becomes a broad pedestrian-only thoroughfare. It starts within the Zona Colonial at the large industrial port at the mouth of the Río Ozama, where an intact section of the old city wall follows it for 100m to the seventeenth-century **San José Fort**, built on a strategic oceanfront promontory after an attempted invasion by the British in 1655. The cannon that remain appear to point across the street at a 50m-high statue of **Fray Montesino**, a sixteenth-century priest who preached against the Taino genocide, his legendary rage manifested in the flame-like spikes of his hair. This section of the boardwalk is extremely popular at night, with massive crowds and live music on weekends at the commercial port below Puerta San Diego and a lively crowd at *D'Luis Parrillada* (see p.77), an outdoor restaurant with dancing at night right next to the Montesino statue.

A kilometre further west you'll find **La Obelisca**, a large, two-pronged obelisk that locals equate with parted legs, placed there by Trujillo in 1941 to honour repayment of a long-outstanding debt to the United States, incurred over the decades by less budget-conscious Dominican administrations. Another kilometre consult a **brujo**, or spiritual medium, who offers herbal healing remedies and acts as a go-between in barter deals made with the saints; in exchange for good health, for example, you might trade daily prayers for a year, a week-long pilgrimage to Higüey on foot, or a direct cash payment to the *brujo*.

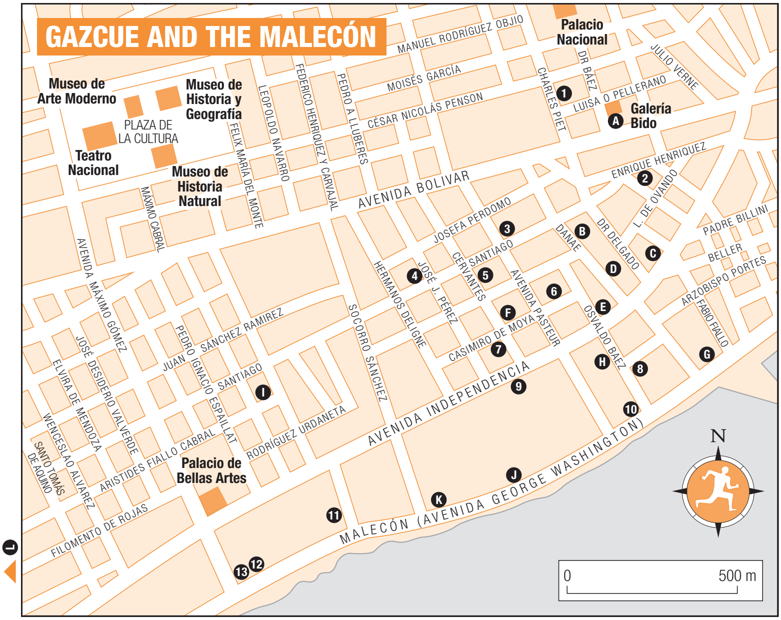
Another manifestation is the existence of many **cofradías** – religious brotherhoods that are an amalgamation of Spanish Catholic fraternities and West African secret societies. Syncretic *cofradías* actually began among black slaves in Spain and Portugal in the fourteenth century, before the discovery of the New World. In Santo Domingo's early days the societies were officially sanctioned by the Church and used the cathedral for their annual processions. Most were then dedicated to San Juan Bautista – who represented the Dahomeyan Chango – but in time slaves came instead from the Congo/Angola region further south and the societies were taken over by their incorporeal supreme deity Kalunda, who is identified with the Holy Spirit; these *cofradías* are usually named **Hermanidad del Congo**. *Cofradías* activities include sponsoring festivals in honour of Espíritu Santo and funeral rites for dead members. After the funeral, a nine-day second wake is held to assist in the passing on of the dead to the spirit world; on the anniversary of the person's death, the brotherhood then holds a ceremony with the family which often involves possession of a family member by the deceased, who parcels out practical advice.

All the aspects of Dominican syncretism can be witnessed at the **fiestas patronales**. These festivals vary quite a bit in the amount of folk religion they exhibit (some have had most of the religion leeched out of them). In Nigua, 12km west of Santo Domingo, you may also stumble onto a **rosario**, a penitent procession entreating the Virgin of Altagracia in times of drought or distress, with townsfolk marching behind the banner of their patron saint, singing folk songs structured in the manner of the Catholic "Hail Mary" (sung fifty times each in three sessions) and playing tambourines and drums; some devotees carry boulders on their head as an act of penance. Devout individuals and *cofradías* also sponsor private festivals called **velaciones** in their home barrios, though you'll need an invitation to go to one. If invited, etiquette demands that you help defray costs by bringing a bottle of rum and RD$100 to the society's leader.

west is a second obelisk, **El Obelisco**, built in 1936 to commemorate Santo Domingo's temporary re-christening as Ciudad Trujillo, though now bearing distinctly anti-Trujillo murals depicting the Mirabal sisters, whom he assassinated, as nature goddesses capturing rainbows in a gourd. Beyond here, a line of high-rise hotels, restaurants, discos and festive outdoor parks stretches for 4km. Dotted all along are a series of **outdoor party zones** (notably at avenidas Sánchez and Máximo Gómez) where you'll see plenty of dancing and activity every evening, though between these bright spots you're likely to be accosted from time to time by local hustlers acting as freelance "tour guides".

Past the chain of hotels is the **Centro de los Héroes**, the nation's administrative centre and home of parliament, marked along the promenade by a large pink arch and accompanying globe. At its far western end, the **Teatro de Agua y Luz**, a 1940s outdoor amphitheatre, has more water and light displays: the three large fountains in front come alive with colour on the rare occasions when there's a concert here. From here the waterfront becomes mostly residential, though closer to the Río Haina, a 2km stretch of gaudy Vegas-style *cabañas turísticas* marks the longest zone of "hourly" motels in the country (see p.25).

A quick note for those tempted by the stereotypically Caribbean waters that the Malecón skirts: **swimming** here is a very bad idea. Not only is it polluted,


GAZCUE AND THE MALECÓN

Museo de Arte Moderno
Museo de Historia y Geografía
PLAZA DE LA CULTURA
Teatro Nacional
Museo de Historia Natural
Palacio Nacional
Galería Bido
Palacio de Bellas Artes
MANUEL RODRÍGUEZ OBJIO
MOISÉS GARCÍA
CÉSAR NICOLÁS PENSON
LUISA O PELLERANO
JULIO VERNE
CHARLES PIET
DR BÁEZ
AVENIDA BOLIVAR
ENRIQUE HENRIQUEZ
L. DE OVANDO
PADRE BILLINI
BELLER
ARZOBISPO PORTES
FABIO FIALLO
JOSEFA PERDOMO
SANTIAGO
CERVANTES
DANAE
DR DELGADO
AVENIDA PASTEUR
OSVALDO BAEZ
CASIMIRO DE MOYA
JOSÉ J. PÉREZ
HERMANOS DELIGNE
SOCORRO SÁNCHEZ
AVENIDA INDEPENDENCIA
MALECÓN (AVENIDA GEORGE WASHINGTON)
FEDERICO HENRIQUEZ Y CARVAJAL
PEDRO A LLUBERES
LEOPOLDO NAVARRO
FELIX MARÍA DEL MONTE
MÁXIMO CABRAL
AVENIDA MÁXIMO GÓMEZ
JUAN SÁNCHEZ RAMIREZ
PEDRO IGNACIO ESPAILLAT
SANTIAGO
RODRÍGUEZ URDANETA
JOSÉ DESIDERIO VALVERDE
ELVIRA DE MENDOZA
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ACCOMMODATION				EATING & DRINKING			
La Casona Dorada	E	Melía Santo Domingo	J	Amazonia	1	Palacio de Jade	11
Felicidad	I	El Napolitano	G	Ananda	6	La Parada Cerveza	10
La Grand Mansión	D	Renaissance Jaragua	K	Cantabrico	9	El Provocon 4to	4
Hilton Santo Domingo	L	La Residencia	B	Charlie	8	Reina de España	5
Hospidaje Tu Espacio	F	Venezia	C	El Conuco	7	Trattoria Vesuvio	13
Maison Gatreaux	H			Don Pepe	3	Vesuvio	12
La Mansíon	A			Paco’s Bananas	2		

but the food waste being dumped into it from the mouth of the Río Ozama attracts **sharks**.

Gazcue and around

Well west of the Zona Colonial and north of the Malecón is rambling, tree-shaded **Gazcue**, the city’s prettiest residential district, a mostly middle-class neighbourhood highlighted by the **Plaza de la Cultura**, Máximo Gómez and Ureña, a complex of four museums alongside the National Theatre and Library. While southern Gazcue is in easy walking distance of Parque Independencia and the Zone, the Plaza is far enough away that you’ll need a taxi or a guagua to get there.

Museo de Arte Moderno

Of the museums in the Plaza de la Cultura, the first stop should be the **Museo de Arte Moderno** (Tues–Sun 10am–6pm; RD$20; ☎685-2154), four storeys dedicated to modernist and postmodern Dominican art, with a magnificent permanent collection on the second and third floors, temporary exhibits on the first and fourth, and installation art in the basement. At times the assemblage can seem a bit random, exacerbated by the frequent rotation of pieces within the museum space, but certain themes, like a reliance on Taino influences, can be spotted. Notable in this regard is Clara Ledesma’s *Casetas*, in the **first floor**’s first room, in which Taino-rendered *campesinos* peek out of a *colmado* and several mud huts at two gringo tourists lying on the beach.

The next room holds the arresting *El sacrificio del chivo*, Elegio Pichardo's dark depiction of a family meal that interprets the everyday ritual of dinner as a pagan rite – note the shrunken head in the hand of the child as he waits for the mother to carve the goat. The third room is dominated by another piece incorporating native art, Junior Mendoza's *Ritual de Iniciación*, a mixed-media burlap canvas with a malevolent Taino head – half-painted, half-stitched together with bone and shell fragments – surrounded by nails with a circle of straw dolls tied to them by rope. Equally disturbing is the borrowed Roman Catholic iconography of Rincón Mora's *Rito* in the fourth room, his blood-smeared Christ peering through a glass window with smouldering red eyes.

The most highly regarded proponent of a more pastoral strain in modern Dominican art is **Cándido Bidó**, whose stylized idealizations of *campesino* life have won international acclaim. Bidó's father was a Carnival mask maker in Bonao – the influence is apparent in the faces with hollowed-out eyes, straight noses and exaggerated lips. The museum owns six Bidós, all of them in the second floor's fifth room, including his most famous, *El Paseo a las 10am*, a painting of a Dominican woman in a sunhat with a handful of flowers. The pigeon fluttering by her side is a typical Bidó gesture, as is the use of colour: his serene, distinctive world contains a generous application of indigo blue and almost no green, with yellow fields, black mountains and the sun surrounded by a subduing, dark cyst.

Climb to the **second floor** to get a look at Alberto Bajo's *La Vida del Dominicano en Nueva York*, an enormous triptych in the fourth room depicting a family divided by American immigration. The first panel is of a sleepy Dominican fishing village, the second of the emigrant's cramped Manhattan apartment (with a letter home in the typewriter) and the third of the alien, neon rumble of Times Square. Around the corner in the fifth room are Frank Almayar's *Composición Gráfico de Duarte*, a dot-matrix Warhol rip-off that draws attention to the country's unreflecting obsession with the image of its liberator, and Silvano Lora's *Flor Endemica*, a mixed-media commentary on the bombed-out urban environment that many of the country's children live in. Lora is known locally as an outspoken defender of the oppressed – in 1992, when replicas of Columbus's three ships tried to dock in Santo Domingo in honour of the 500th anniversary of his voyage, Lora dressed up like a Taino, paddled out to the boats in a canoe and fired arrows at them until his vessel was capsized by the Coast Guard.

Museo del Hombre Dominicano

The plaza's other main attraction is the **Museo del Hombre Dominicano** (Tues–Sun 10am–5pm; RD$50; English-language guide RD$50; ☎687-3622, Ⓦwww.museodelhombredominicano.org.do), which holds an extraordinary collection of Taino artefacts and an anthropological exhibit on Dominican *fiestas patronales*. The ground floor is mostly concerned with the gift shop, but does display a dozen stone obelisks and Taino burial mounds found near Boca Chica in the 1970s. The first floor is office space; the **second floor** consists of one large room bearing display cases of Taino sculpture, beginning with seated human figures and *cemis* – small stone idols that stood in for the gods during rituals, possessing large, inward-spiralling eyes and flared nostrils. Further down the room is an extensive collection of flints, hatchets and stone spearheads, which can be scanned over before passing to the two cases bearing beautiful animal sculptures and ceremonial daggers. At the far end of the room you'll find jewellery with incredibly intricate carvings made from coral, tooth, stone and conch shell, a case filled with spectacularly nasty looking death heads and a few examples of the artwork created by the Tainos' ancestors in the Amazon basin.

The **third floor** moves to Dominican culture after Columbus, with emphasis on the African influence. The first room focuses on the slave trade; the next room is taken up by a comparison of the rural dwellings of African peasants and Dominican *campesinos*. These are followed by a terrific exhibition on syncretist religious practices in the DR, including photographs of various rural *fiestas patronales* and a Dominican *Vodú* altar, with Catholic iconography standing in for African gods, votive candles and a sacrifice of cigarettes, a chicken and a bottle of rum. From here walk past the display of local musical instruments that originated in Africa to three large glass cases depicting costumed Carnival celebrations in Monte Cristi, La Vega and Santo Domingo.

Around the Plaza de la Cultura

Continue north on Máximo Gómez from the Plaza de la Cultura to visit the **Centro Olímpico** on Avenida Kennedy and Máximo Gómez, a wooded public park with basketball and tennis courts, Olympic swimming pool, pavilions for gymnastics and volleyball and three baseball fields that are heavily scouted by North America's major leagues. Only Dominican citizens are supposed to use the facilities, but you're unlikely to be challenged except at the pool.

East of the Plaza de la Cultura, on Av Mexico and 30 de Marzo, stands the office of the president, the **Palacio Nacional** (ⓣ695-8000; viewable only via organized tour, call two days in advance), an attractive, coral-pink marble edifice that's even better on the inside. Contemplating the decadent glory of the interior is worth the effort it takes to get a tour: mahogany furnishings, marble floors, gold and silver inlay, monumental murals depicting major historical events and an enormous hall of mirrors with fifty caryatids (pillars sculpted into the shape of women) and six chandeliers. The visitors' entrance is in the back of the palace on Calle Dr Báez, where you'll find two massive bronze lions flanking the portal. South of the plaza on the corner of Independencia and Máximo Gómez is the similarly sumptuous **Palacio de Bellas Artes** (ⓣ682-1325, ⓦwww.bellasartes.gov.do), a rectangular temple to high art that holds regular classical music performances by touring ensembles and "merenjazz" concerts from top local musicians.

If you were taken with the works of Cándido Bidó in the Museo de Arte Moderno, it's worth making a detour to **Galería Bidó** on Calle Dr Báez 5, a half-block north of Independencia (Mon–Fri 9am–6pm, Sat 9am–12.30pm; ⓣ685-5310, ⓦwww.galeriacandidobido.com), a rambling home whose first floor holds one of the city's best private galleries. The painter's style has undergone some interesting transformations in his most recent work. The doll-like, hollow-eyed faces – which once conveyed pastoral innocence – are now being exploited for their ability to convey existential angst. One piece consists of a series of still lifes in which discarded piles of these open-mouthed dolls stare eyeless from a pastel tablecloth. The gallery also features rotating exhibits of other top Dominican artists.

A few blocks west of the Palacio de Bellas Artes begins the **Parque Mirador del Sur**, a 7km-long walking and cycling area scattered with baseball diamonds.

Arroyo Hondo

Neither as wealthy as Gazcue below it nor as desperate as the barrios beyond it, **Arroyo Hondo** is a fairly bland expanse of residential neighbourhoods that shifts from upper-crust mansions in the south to makeshift shacks in the north. The area does, however, boast two of the city's best museums – the **Museo Prehispánico** and the **Museo Bellapart** – and some expansive green spaces, including the impressive **Jardín Botánico**, which make it well worth a visit.

Jardín Botánico

The botanical gardens, on Av Jardín Botánico and Los Próceres (daily 9am–6pm; RD$50; Ⓦwww.jbn-sdq.org), has samples of flora from every part of the island, a pavilion with three hundred types of orchid (most endemic) and greenhouses for bromeliads and aquatic plants. Less indigenous but quite striking is the manicured Japanese garden with a maze of shrubs and a pagoda with shaded benches beside a babbling brook. An RD$15 train ride will take you through the length of the park with a stop-off at some of the highlights, but it's far more pleasant to wander about the grounds at your leisure.

Museo Prehispánico

The **Museo Prehispánico**, San Martín 179 and Lopé de Vega (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm; free), is a private collection of Taino artefacts housed in a large room within the Pepsi-Cola corporate building, rivalling the display at the Museo del Hombre Dominicano in Gazcue. At the entrance are a few Venezuelan pieces (the Tainos' ancestral home) to provide historical context, a prelude to the fossilized mastodon and armadillo remains, animals the natives hunted to extinction on the island. Further on stand display cases outlining the history of indigenous ceramics, followed by intricate tooth and bone sculptures used in necklaces – one is so small you need a magnifying glass to see the carving. At the far end of the room you'll see jewellery made from conch shells, coral, teeth and clay, before turning left to the opposite end of the room for a view of an intact wooden *duho* – a chair carved with the face of a Taino god, used by *caciques* as a throne during religious ceremonies. Along the wall beside it is a collection of clay animals that represented various deities, including a dozen frogs, a few turtles, a crocodile and two owls, which were believed to ferry souls to the afterlife. The exhibit turns to more practical items as you double back towards the entrance, but the intricate ornamentation on the pots, cassava grinders and ceremonial axeheads keeps your attention from flagging. Especially arresting is the jet-black monolith of a Taino deity with an ostentatious phallus – originally meant to guard the entrance to a cave.

Museo Bellapart

Also well worth a visit is the **Museo Bellapart**, Avenida Kennedy and Dr Peguero (Mon–Fri 10am–6pm, Sat 9am–noon; free; Ⓣ541-7721, Ⓦwww.museobellapart.com), located in a single large room on the first floor of a massive Honda dealership. This small private art museum holds the very best of Dominican art from the first half of the twentieth century. The paintings follow a timeline from the 1890s through the late 1950s. Highlights include social-realist Jaime Colsón's *Merengue* at the entrance, a surreal rendition of a typical Dominican *fandango*, which is strongly influenced by Mexican muralist art; the subdued deco aesthetic of Celeste Woss y Gill's *Retrato sin fecha*, a lush portrait of a Latin flapper from the Roaring Twenties gracefully scanning a book; and folk artist Yoryi Morel's ragged depiction of a Dominican *campo* entitled *Dedicado a Mi Madre*. The crowning glory of the collection, though, is Spanish exile **José Vela Zanetti**'s *La Vida de los Campesinos* series; his work also graces the walls of the UN Security Council in New York. The painting here marks a stylistic break from the monumental social-realism of his work on public buildings, sketchier and more attuned to the modernism of Van Gogh, with rough-hewn peasants in front of a whorling, almost formless background of barren rolling hills. Especially arresting are *Familia Campesina* and *Retrato Paño Azul*, which offer a poignant human intimacy absent in his more ambitious, sweeping social statements.

East of the Ozama

Though most of Santo Domingo's attractions lie west of the Río Ozama, there are a few scattered points of interest along the eastern bank and beyond. The best known of these is the controversial Columbus Lighthouse (Tues–Sun 9.30am–5.30pm; RD$100; ☎591-1492), known locally as **El Faro** (simply "the lighthouse"), a monument finally completed, after decades in the making, in 1992 – the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas. The idea for such a tribute dates to the 1850s, when several prominent intellectuals signed an editorial in *Listin Diario* calling for its creation. In 1929 an international competition was held for its design. Given that there were over 450 contestants from fifty countries, it's hard to understand how British architect J.C. Gleave's monstrous, cross-shaped entry beat the competition; the edifice resembles nothing so much as an immaculately scrubbed prison.

Within this bombastic eyesore stands the Baroque **mausoleum of Christopher Columbus**, with dozens of flowery angels hovering above the marble casket alongside a more corporeal 24-hour honour guard. Also on the ground floor, look for a series of galleries with paintings of the Virgin Mary from every country in the Americas; on the third floor is a modest Naval Museum. The lighthouse's most impressive feature is the 250-laser cross of light that it projects onto the city's night sky, though even that is resented by many here – it's said that whenever it turns on, power goes out in villages across the country. Columbus's role in the Taino genocide led to protests in the capital when the lighthouse was opened and the government's razing of one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods to build it didn't help. Another sticking point was the price tag, estimated to be US$100–150 million.

El Faro towers over the western end of **Parque Mirador del Este**, a pleasant stretch of manicured woodlands spanning the length of the barrios east of the Ozama. At the park's far eastern tip is a series of large caves dotted with freshwater lagoons. Known as **Los Tres Ojos**, or "The Three Eyes" (daily 9am–5pm; RD$25), the caves were used by the Tainos for religious ceremonies; more recently they've been the setting for no less than six Tarzan movies. Walkways lead you to three of the lagoons and a manually powered pulley conducts a ferry to a fourth.

The eastern bank of the Ozama was the first part of the city that was settled, but Christopher Columbus's outpost was constructed from timber and the lone colonial relic left here is the early sixteenth-century **Capilla del Rosario** (daily 10.30am–4.30pm; free), a pretty, single-nave church with three brick portals supposedly built on the site of Christopher's home. Just north, check out **El Monumento de Azúcar**, on Avenida España, a realist metal sculpture depicting noble *campesinos* driving oxen and cartloads of sugar cane. Back south, España bends around to the **Acuario Nacional** (Tues–Sun 9am–5.30pm; RD$50; ☎766-1709), which centres on a large Plexiglas tunnel surrounded by a tank full of sharks, manta rays, moray eels and other sea creatures.

Villa Mella and the outer barrios

The city's **outer barrios** are, for the most part, extremely poor industrial zones with a mix of concrete-box homes and thatch huts. There are no tourist sights in the traditional sense and if you want to explore them for a sense of how people here live, you should do so only during the day, as they become dangerous at night. Buses leave Parque Enriquillo every twenty minutes to **Los Alcarrizos** (RD$25), a concrete suburb buzzing with swarms of motorcycles and with dozens of storefront Pentecostal churches; **La Ciénaga**, a riverside barrio that was hit hard by Hurricane Georges; **Sabana Perdida**, a relatively prosperous, sprawling residential zone northeast of the city; concrete, palm-treed **Villa Mella**, a poor neighbourhood with the most interesting syncretic religious festivals in the city; and **Yamasá**, a relatively rural area well north of the city where you can visit a local factory to find out how Taino ceramics were made.

Between Villa Mella and the Río Isabela is **Parque Mirador del Norte** (daily 8am–6pm; RD$10), the city's largest public park, though it actually sees little use; its six square kilometres are dominated by chinaberry trees, bisected by an enormous artificial lake and a driving route for cars.

Villa Mella's population is largely descended from Congolese slaves and elements of Congo culture are still evident in the local language, religion and music. Indeed, during the festivities of **Espíritu Santo** (seven weeks after Semana Santa), congo drums are played round the clock for nine straight days at both the Parque Central and Iglesia Espíritu Santo, on Máximo Gómez.

All year round you can experience the local syncretic culture by making a stop-off at **Mata Los Indios**, a tiny and poor suburban pueblo at the edge of Santo Domingo's sprawl. To find it, head 1km north from Villa Mella on Máximo Gómez and turn left at the second dirt road after the Nativa petrol station; guagua drivers know its location and can drop you off here. Its inhabitants maintain an ancient brotherhood known as *Hermanidad del Congo* (see p.69). On arrival you'll see the small **Museo de la Cofradía del Espíritu Santo** (daily 9am–5pm; ☎239-9506; RD$20 donation suggested), which displays photographs of the brotherhood's rituals and festivities and some strikingly beautiful paper floats that are created for the anniversaries of dead loved ones. The museum's manager is friendly and a fountain of local knowledge; she'll take you to see Joselito, a local drum-maker who is in remarkable shape given his 100-odd years and still makes his own congo and *palos* drums by hollowing out tree trunks by hand with a blunt steel tool. The drums are colourful and truly remarkable, quite possibly the finest opportunity for a local souvenir on the island (they run between RD$3000–7000 depending on the size).

Just a kilometre north of the Mata los Indios turnoff, where the construction peters out into cow fields, you might dare sample the locally famous *chicharrones* (pork rinds) from the vendors who line the far northern end of Máximo Gómez; they're considered a local delicacy but are strictly for the strong of stomach.

Yamasá

From Villa Mella it's another 15km north along Máximo Gómez to the village of Yamasá and the **Taina Cerámica** factory (closed Sun; ☎525-0756) of the locally famous Hermanos Guillen. The Guillen brothers are artists who carefully studied the ceramic artwork of the Tainos and now produce replicas so authentic that most archeologists can't tell the difference – except that the Guillen brothers sign each piece. Their handiwork is sold in stores throughout the country, but you can save more than 75 percent by buying at the factory and they'll gladly take visitors on a tour of the multi-step process of digging for clay, mashing the material with their feet, shaping the sculpture by hand, drawing the symbols and finally cooking it in an old-fashioned kiln. They also run a cocoa factory where you watch the process of making chocolate and taste the local variety; the factory itself is very no-frills, but the hot chocolate they serve at the end is delicious.

To get to Yamasá by **public transport**, take the Máximo Gómez Metro to the end of the line at Villa Mella and then switch to a guagua (around RD$100). If you're **driving** and want to get to **Taina Cerámica**, head straight up Máximo Gómez, turn left at the fork in the road a few kilometres north of Villa Mella and then left again at the fork with a statue of Taino Queen Anacaona. When in town turn right at the first street after the **Parque Central**, or just call Yamasá Taxi (☎535-0709).

Eating

Dining options in the capital range from the small family *comedores* and *pica pollos* present in every neighbourhood to gourmet restaurants with **ethnic cuisines** as diverse as Basque, North African and Japanese. At the more expensive restaurants, expect to spend about US$25–40 including tax and tip (but not drinks); phone numbers are given in the listings below where reservations may be necessary. **Gazcue** is the city's top restaurant district, but there are plenty of great places within the Zona Colonial and in the smarter parts of the **Arroyo Hondo** district as well. Much cheaper fare can be found in the many informal food shacks and stands that dot the Malecón, where you'll be able to pick up pulled-pork sandwiches, grilled chicken with rice and beans or a burger for as little as RD$60.

There are plenty of good **grocery stores** spread throughout town, including Nacional, 27 de Febrero and Lopé de Vega; Supermercado Casa Pérez, Arz. Nouel and Hincado; and Supermercado Olé, Av Duarte 194. Otherwise, you can get basic food supplies and cooking ingredients at the numerous small *colmados* spread throughout the city.

Zona Colonial

The following places are shown on the map on p.77.

Angelo Atarazana 21 ⓣ686-3586. Traditional pizzeria on the Plaza España. Great for a mellow evening hangout, with outdoor tables and a range of good thin-crust options from Margherita or pineapple and ham to more adventurous ones like artichokes and olives. Look to spend around US$20 per person here.

La Bríciola Arz. Meriño 152 ⓣ688-5055, ⓦwww.labriciola.com.do. Impeccable service and elegant, candlelit ambience in a restored colonial palace featuring a menu of fresh home-made pastas and seafood. There's also a very elegant bar here called *Doubles* where you can order the same great food in a more casual environment. Prices are fairly expensive at around RD$300 per meal.

La Cafetera El Conde 253. Best of the cafés along El Conde and a popular haunt for local painters and musicians. Come for the delicious but greasy traditional Dominican breakfasts with fresh orange juice and *café con leche*. Also sells bottles of the best local rums at great prices, along with cutting-edge Spanish literature. Closed Sun.

Dumbo Arz. Nouel and Piña at Parque Independencia. Great workaday Dominican grub in a diner setting for around US$5 a plate. Peppered beefsteaks, several tasty chicken dishes and surprisingly good fish.

Falafel Billini and Sánchez. Israeli immigrants run this truly awesome little Mediterranean bistro, where the falafel are fabulous. Locals like it with mayo, so be sure to mention it if you want it without.

Harry's Bar Las Atarazanas 29, Plaza España. Least touristy of the spots along Plaza España, with excellent *comida criolla* and pleasant proprietors. For a memorable refreshment, try a heavenly *morir soñando*.

Mesón de Bari Hostos 302 and Ureña. This local tavern serves the best food in the Zona Colonial, particularly the *filet encebollado* – perhaps the best steak in the country – for RD$600. The exceptionally fresh seafood includes *cangrejos guisados*, a house speciality that features local soft-shell crabs in a garlic sauce. Swift service and fun atmosphere, though it gets rather noisy on weekends when it doubles as an extremely popular local bar and the music is amped up several notches.

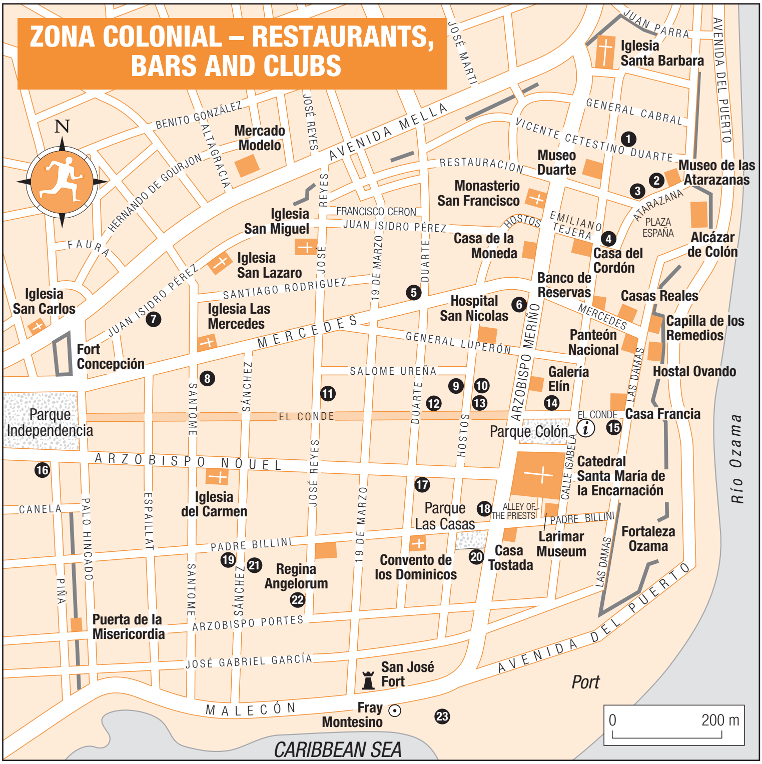
El Mesón de Luís Hostos and El Conde. Run by a friendly local family, this diner serves up breakfasts (the best time to come) and typical Dominican dishes for around RD$90.

Passatiempo Arz. Meriño and Mercedes ⓣ689-4823. Two-part Italian restaurant, one with outstanding thin-crust pizzas and the other with high-end offerings such as *osso buco*, lobster *linguine* and wild mushroom risotto. Pizzas average US$20 for 3–4 people, a full dinner US$35 per person.

Patio de Moneda El Conde 53 between Isabela and Las Damas. Solid, workaday Italian and Dominican fare in an exceedingly pleasant, tree-shaded courtyard; more notable for the great setting than the food.

Malecón

The following places are shown on the map on p.70, unless otherwise stated.



ZONA COLONIAL – RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CLUBS

N
Iglesia Santa Barbara
Juan Parra
Avenida del Puerto
José Martí
General Cabral
Benito González
Mercado Modelo
José Reyes
Avenida Mella
Vicente Cetestino Duarte
Museo Duarte
Museo de las Atarazanas
Altagracia
Hernando de Gourjon
Restauración
Monasterio San Francisco
Reyes
Francisco Ceron
Juan Isidro Pérez
Hostos
Emiliano Tejera
Atarazana
Plaza España
Alcázar de Colón
Iglesia San Miguel
Casa de la Moneda
Casa del Cordón
Faura
Iglesia San Lazaro
José
19 de Marzo
Duarte
Banco de Reservas
Casas Reales
Santiago Rodriguez
Iglesia San Carlos
Juan Isidro Pérez
Iglesia Las Mercedes
Hospital San Nicolas
Mercedes
Capilla de los Remedios
Fort Concepción
General Luperón
Panteón Nacional
Salome Ureña
Galería Elín
Hostal Ovando
Las Damas
Arzobispo Meriño
Sánchez
Santome
Parque Independencia
El Conde
Parque Colón
Casa Francia
Arzobispo Nouel
Catedral Santa María de la Encarnación
Calle Isabela
Río Ozama
Canela
Espaillat
Iglesia del Carmen
José Reyes
19 de Marzo
Parque Las Casas
Alley of the Priests
Padre Billini
Larimar Museum
Fortaleza Ozama
Palo Hincado
Piña
Padre Billini
Regina Angelorum
Convento de los Dominicos
Casa Tostada
Las Damas
Santome
Sánchez
Puerta de la Misericordia
Arzobispo Portes
José Gabriel García
San José Fort
Avenida del Puerto
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Fray Montesino
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EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Angelo	2	La Cafetera	12	Falafel	19	Mesón de Bari	9	Passatiempo	6
Atarazana 9	3	Click	1	Friends	7	El Meson de Luis	13	Patio de Moneda	15
Bio	21	D'Luis Parrillada	23	Hard Rock Cafe	14	Murano	5	Proud Mary	17
La Briciola	18	Dumbo	16	Harry's Bar	4	Nowhere Bar	10		
Café del Teatro	20	Esedeku	8	Jaydee's	22	Ocho Puertas	11		

Charlie Llúberes 9 between Malecón and Independencia. Unpretentious little à la carte restaurant specializing in large portions of grilled pork chops, chicken, steak and rabbit.

D'Luis Parrillada Plaza Montesino, Malecón and Fiallo. See map, above. The capital's most popular late-night spot, with outdoor seating along the ocean, cheap food and a hyped-up merengue atmosphere. The speciality here is Argentine-style grilled meat dishes and the quality of the cooking makes the long waits for service more than worth it. Open 24hr.

Palacio de Jade Heredia 6 ☎686-3226. Pricey Chinese, Cantonese and Mongolian cuisine in a fake moated castle with karaoke rooms on the second floor. Specialities include Peking duck and shrimp with black bean sauce. Quite an "experience", but well worth stopping by for the top-notch food.

Trattoria Vesuvio Malecón 523. Best pizza in town, with good sandwiches, ham-and-cheese crepes and pastas. Run by the same management as next door's *Vesuvio* but more casual and family-oriented. Pizzas run around US$20 for a large that can feed 3–4.

Vesuvio Malecón 521 ☎221-1954. One of the most renowned restaurants in the city, deservedly so for its vast array of delicious, if expensive, pastas. Particularly recommended are the risotto *con frutas del mar* and gnocchi gorgonzola.

Gazcue

The following places are shown on the map on p.70.

Ananda Casimiro de Moya 7. Popular vegetarian cafeteria and arty-crowd hangout, sometimes showcasing live merengue on Mon nights. Food is good but fairly bland, though the tempuras are quite well done.

Cantabrico Independencia 54 ☎687-5101. Classy, unpretentious dining room, with high-priced specialities like Valencian-style paellas and Segovian suckling pig. A romantic, old-school spot that's known for its great service.

El Conuco Casimiro de Moya 152 ☎686-0129. Dominican cuisine glorifying life in the *campos* – you'll be attended to by singing, dancing waiters. The daily RD$75 buffet is a bargain and the menu features traditional treats such as *sancocho* and *chivo orégano*. Set in an oversized *bohío* – a traditional *campesino* common area inherited from the Tainos.

Don Pepe Troncoso 5 ☎563-4440. If you've budgeted for one big splurge, come here for traditional, high-end Dominican dining at its best. The menu is a display of fresh seafood on ice (try the *al horno* style), including lobster, an assortment of fish and, best of all, giant crab. Don't miss the dessert tray, with its terrific flans, cheesecakes and crème caramel. Look to spend around RD$900 per person.

Paco's Bananas Danae 64 ☎689-5427. Large, popular neighbourhood restaurant serving great Dominican food in a casual setting. Recommended are the conch soup, gazpacho, shrimp creole, grilled fish, *pescado con coco* and flan.

El Provocón 4to Santiago and José Pérez and with other locations throughout the city. Outdoor patio offering heaping portions of grilled chicken, rice and beans, and salad. Good for a large, inexpensive (around RD$80) lunch. Open 24hr.

Reina de España Cervantes 103 at Santiago ☎685-2588. Elegant dining room with traditional Spanish cuisine such as Basque-style *mero*, hake in green sauce, rabbit in garlic sauce and roast piglet. Look to spend around RD$250 per person here.

Arroyo Hondo

The following places are shown on the map on p.54.

Alma Llanera Av Churchill 51 just south of 27 de Febrero. A small spot easily walked past without notice, this little kitchen serves tremendous Venezuelan dishes like shredded beef in creole sauce and a variety of *cachapas* – cornbread pancakes stuffed with beef, chicken, shredded pork or cheese. A nice find and good for those on a tight budget.

Chino de Mariscos Sarasota 38A ☎533-5249. Authentic Hong Kong dining room with excellent Chinese seafood dishes. Start out with one of the seafood soups and move on to the black bean lobster or garlic shrimp. Expect to spend RD$300 or so on dinner for two.

David Crockett Ricart 34 ☎547-2999. Excellent steak house with corny "Wild West" decor, which makes it quite popular with kids. The massive porterhouse steaks go under the name "Cowboy Filet"; rack of lamb and prime rib are also favourites. Look to spend US$50 here for two.

Mesón de la Cava J. Contreras 237, Mirador del Sur at eastern end of park ☎533-2818. Funky restaurant in a large Taino cave, with lobster, shrimp *ajillo* and rib-eye steaks. The food is decent enough, but it's more notable for the unique setting.

Samurai Av Lincoln 902 and Inchaustegui ☎565-1621. Authentic Japanese sushi bar, a definite rarity in these parts, with *shabu shabu*, mixed sushi and sashimi platters, hibachi platters and sake. Surprisingly inexpensive considering the high quality.

Scherezade Pastoriza 226 and Lincoln ☎227-2323. Great Middle Eastern cuisine in a mock mosque with occasional belly dancing. Best are the vegetable couscous and lobster in a caviar salsa.

Drinking, nightlife and entertainment

Santo Domingo's Malecón is the traditional focus of **nightlife**; along with some of the city's finest dancehalls, the promenade is crowded with outdoor restaurants and food shacks that slowly start getting crowded around 10pm and stay open into the early hours of the morning. Less known to outsiders are the nightclubs along Avenida Venezuela 1km east of the Río Ozama and Avenida Abraham Lincoln north of 27 de Febrero, easily the most popular clubs with locals but a bit intimidating for foreigners. In addition to the discos listed below, Avenida Venezuela boasts a host of smaller beer halls, pool halls and *colmados* that attract huge crowds nightly. There are also several clubs across the city that specialize in **son** – a slow, melodious Cuban groove with acoustic guitars and percussion that many Dominicans claim was born here – long popular and enjoying unprecedented respectability, highlighted by a citywide festival in March.

Keep in mind, though, that in 2007 due to an increase in night-time crime across the country, a strict **curfew** on drinking was imposed that shut all bars and dance-halls down at 11pm every night. These restrictions had the desired effect of lowering the crime rate significantly and have since been informally relaxed to the point where you can expect bars to stay open until 2am on most nights.

For some informal Dominican entertainment, check out the **merengue périco ripao** bands that wander the crowded *colmados* along Avenida Duarte in the early evening. A popular tradition with the local middle class is **open bars**, where the drinks are free once you pay the cover charge; check the Spanish-language website ⓦwww.809k.com for open bars across the city.

There are several Spanish-language websites devoted exclusively to covering the latest events in Santo Domingo nightlife; particularly well worth checking out before you arrive is ⓦwww.uepa.com.

Bars and cafés

The **Zona Colonial** is the place for bar-hopping: at night the ruins are particularly atmospheric and dotted around them are a variety of working-class neighbourhood joints, jazz bars and slick clubs. The other major centre of activity is the **Plaza Central shopping district** in **Arroyo Hondo**, where most wealthy young Dominicans hang out. It's counter-intuitive, but the busiest night for heading out to these bars is Monday, perhaps because locals need to fortify themselves in the face of a new week at work. The **Malecón** also has a number of popular informal shacks, with a few chairs and tables, that sell booze to the sound of blaring merengue.

Zona Colonial

The following places are shown on the map on p.77.

Bio Billini and Sánchez. The hippest new bar in the zone, a two-storey lounge with a great mix of western and Latin music that's a bit poser-ish but still a must on anyone's Zona Colonial bar-hopping itinerary.

Café del Teatro Arz. Meriño 110 ⓣ688-8173, ⓦwww.casateatro.com. Classy courtyard café in the nineteenth-century Casa del Teatro, a drama venue that also features live jazz and jazz-influenced Latin combos.

Mesón de Bari Hostos and Ureña. Don't miss this atmospheric after-work gathering place, notable for its soundtrack of traditional bachata, Sinatra, jazz and old-style Cuban son. The seafood dishes are quite good here as well (see p.76).

Nowhere Bar Hostos 205 just north of El Conde. Tremendously popular cocktail bar that's completely packed on weekends starting at midnight with the local twentysomething set. Has a definite "trendy New York" feel to it.

Ocho Puertas José Reyes 107. The granddaddy of the local rave clubs has tamed down over time and is now more of a typical watering hole, but still features the same gorgeously restored colonial mansion with a couch-filled lounge, an outdoor plaza and a standard bar. The music is a mix of everything from trance to Jimi Hendrix and they also serve decent burgers and similar fare.

Proud Mary Duarte 55. Best expat hangout in Santo Domingo, a really cool American rock bar with a great mix of foreigners and locals. Great place to chill out and detox from merengue.

Malecón

The following places are shown on the map on p.70.

La Parada Cerveza Plaza D'Frank, just west of the *Hotel Inter-Continental*, Malecón. The most popular of the outdoor beer joints dotting the boardwalk and a favourite hangout of baseball legend Sammy Sosa. It's reputed to have the coldest beer in town.

Arroyo Hondo

The following places are shown on the map on p.54.

Bakkus Sarasota and Moya. Wine shop that has a small ground-floor plate-glass window bar that opens at night. Great place for a drink, with a very solid wine list.

Beer House Tlradentes 28. Beer bar serving 100 beers from thirty different countries, with a big patio and a jungle gym for the tykes to play in.

Monte Cristo Lincoln and José Amado Soler. Great little outer-barrio bar with red billowing curtains and a surprisingly hip crowd split pretty evenly between men and women. For added privacy, you can close the red drapes strung along the outside of the booths. Sharp dress required.

Punto Corcho Av Lincoln and GM Ricart, Plaza Andalucía II. Laidback wine bar with a broad range of Spanish, French, Italian and Chilean selections.

Retro Café Av Lincoln and GM Ricart, Plaza Andalucía II, second floor. Super-cool lounge with a mix of ambient lounge music and 70s hits. A great place to meet people as it's small and the music isn't earsplitting.

Trio Café Av Lincoln just south of 27 de Febrero, Plaza Castilla. A local hotspot for over ten years and still packed to the gills every night – a necessary stopping point for Santo Domingo nightlife newbies. Sun night is "Buddha night", with lounge electronica, while the rest of the time it thrums with high-octane merengue and American hits.

Discos and live music

Weekends see plenty of activity, but the busiest night for local **clubs** is Monday, when most are booked with big-name acts; street-side banners across the city advertise any notable concert, which will raise the cover charge by RD$200.

Zona Colonial

The following places are shown on the map on p.77.

Atarazana 9 Atarazana 9, Plaza España. Super-hip bar with live music, owned by bachata crooner Juan Luis Guerra, with live reggaeton on Thursday nights and some weekends.

Hard Rock Café El Conde at Parque Duarte. Believe it or not but this worldwide chain is one of the big live music venues in the Zona Colonial, with some good "unplugged" Latin acts and the occasional techno night.

Malecón

The following places are shown on the map on p.70.

Jaragua Malecón 367, *Renaissance Jaragua Hotel* ☎688-8026. Large neon hotel disco featuring top-notch sound and light systems, along with expensive drinks. RD$200 cover.

Mauna Loa Calle Héroes de Luperón at Malecón, Centro de los Héroes ☎533-2151. See map, p.59. Super-suave, gorgeous nightclub and casino with two floors of tables looking out onto a big-band stage reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties. The music here is not as good as what you'll find in the outer barrio son clubs, but a lot more convenient to get to. Opens at 6pm, but the music doesn't start until 11pm. RD$100 cover most nights and a one-drink minimum.

Merengue Bar Malecón 367, *Renaissance Jaragua Hotel*. Though smaller than most of the other seafront discos, the nightly live merengue, fancy interiors and lack of cover help bring in a large local crowd.

Napolitano Malecón 101, *Hotel El Napolitano*. Surprisingly, this mid-range hotel has the most popular disco on the boardwalk these days – in large part because working-class twentysomethings can come without paying a steep cover charge. Especially worth seeing on Thurs, featuring bolero star Anthony Ríos.

Outer barrios

The following places are shown on the map on p.54.

La Guácara Taina Av Mirador del Sur ☎530-2151. Probably the most famous club in the city, set in a huge, multi-level natural cave that now focuses almost exclusively on electronica and is a popular spot for ravers, who call it simply "La Cueva". RD$100 cover.

Jet Set Independencia 2253 ☎535-4145. Inconveniently located on the far western end of Independencia is this venerable old merengue club that's always packed with an all-local crowd. Lots of top name acts appear here on weekends and the dancehall doesn't close down until around 6am.

Paraíso Musical Av Máximo Gómez, Villa Mella. About 250m south of the Gilbert Metro stop, this great outdoor son hall is best on Thurs and Sun nights, when they hold old-style dance contests, with elderly Dominican couples cutting brilliant moves.

Taboo y Bamboo Pastoriza 313. Dance club favoured by wealthy thirtysomethings, featuring European electronica and an expensive adjoining Asian fusion restaurant.

East of the Ozama

The following places are shown on the map on p.54.

Eclipse Av Venezuela and Bonaire. The hottest spot on Av Venezuela, this club seems to net major live acts every weekend, though the cover can be steep at RD$400. Closed Mon.

Makumba Av Venezuela and Cabrera. After you enter through the mammoth Sphinx that serves as the building's entrance, you'll find an extremely dark, ridiculously crowded dance club that's one of the most popular on the Venezuela strip. It's so popular that they've branched out to additional locations in the outer barrios and outside Boca Chica. Local acts play frequently as well. RD$120 cover.

Paraiso del Son Av Charles de Gaulle and Los Restauradores, barrio Sabana Perdida Ⓣ590-3666. Famous outdoor son hall reopened after being closed for two years, set in a safe neighbourhood east of the Ozama river and 5km north of the Las Américas highway, with live music Fri–Mon. Features a lot of great, cheesy old vaudeville stuff, including an emcee ventriloquist with a puppet.

Gay clubs and bars

Gay clubs come and go in Santo Domingo so it's often best to check in first at *Friends* (see below) for information on the current scene, or take a look at Ⓦwww.monega.net. Keep in mind you'll be accosted by local hustlers in most places. Male clubs are often a target for assault; unfortunately, it's safest to arrive and depart by taxi.

Amazonia Danae 3 and Independencia, Gazcue. Lesbian bar a bit off the beaten track. Nice location sheltered by a canopy of flowers makes for a good hang out; basically 100 percent Dominican.

Click VC Duarte 3, Zona Colonial. Truly awesome, trendy Zona Colonial lesbian bar and dancehall. Great drinks, great DJ, great company.

Esedeku Mercedes and San Tomé, Zona Colonial. Newest and hippest (at the time of writing) bar in town, mostly locals and a welcoming crowd, though they can get a little snooty at the door.

Friends Polvorín 10 and Juan Isidro Pérez, Zona Colonial. English-operated gay bar near the Parque Independencia. Best place to get oriented to the scene, as the proprietor is well connected and the bar sports a perpetually crowded party atmosphere. Closed Sun.

Jay-Dee's José Reyes 10, Zona Colonial, Ⓦwww.jaydeesdisco.blogspot.com. Longest standing gay disco in Santo Domingo, big place with a loyal crowd and a lot of rowdy drag shows etc, into the wee hours Tues–Sat. This crowd is used to tourists and there's a certain amount of hustling.

Cinema

Most Santo Domingo **cinemas** focus on first-run American action flicks, which hit the screens at the same time as they do in the States; unfortunately, almost every theatre in the city shows the same two or three Hollywood blockbusters. You'll be able to check at the ticket booth whether the film is in English with Spanish subtitles or dubbed. Either way, expect the audience to be as much a part of the show as the movie – locals often derive most of their pleasure from making fun of the action on screen.

Broadway Cinema Plaza Central, 27 de Febrero and Churchill Ⓣ872-0000. Offers alternative films unavailable elsewhere, along with the usual hits.

Cinema Centro Malecón 457, just east of Máximo Gómez Ⓣ686-2642. The usual set of second-run American films in a rowdy atmosphere. Conveniently located close to the tourist hotels.

Hollywood Diamond Cinemas Diamond Plaza at Av Proceres just north of Kennedy Ⓣ565-8866. Well maintained, this multi-level movie theatre attracts plenty of families, so it helps to be good natured about the crowd noise.

Palacio del Cine Bella Vista Mall, 27 de Febrero and Gerardino Ⓣ255-0921, Ⓦwww.p-d-c.com.do. The best of the bunch in terms of cleanliness and concessions. Large screens, too. Also has a multiplex location on Av Venezuela just north of Av España.

Sports and other activities

Baseball is the most exciting spectator sport in Santo Domingo. Two separate professional teams, **Licey** and **Escogido**, play in the winter professional league between mid-November and early February; games are at Estadio Quisqueya, Máximo Gómez and Kennedy (tickets RD$300–1000; Ⓣ616-1224, Ⓦwww.estadioquisqueya.com.do). Tickets are generally available on the night of the

Santo Domingo festivals

February

Carnival

Partying, live music and elaborate costumes along El Conde and the Malecón every Sunday, especially the last of the month. Expect to be pelted with inflated sheep bladders and balloons.

February 27

Independence Day

A citywide celebration on the final day of Carnival, with a raucous re-enactment of the Trinitarians' 1844 torch-lit march to El Conde, to the tune of the *1812 Overture*, accompanied by live cannon. Afterwards, head to Puerta San Diego where you'll hear big-name merengue acts.

Last two weeks of March

Son Festival

Dozens of events celebrating this popular Cuban musical form that many Dominicans claim as their own. *Mesón de Bari* (see p.76) posts a list of all events on its wall in early February.

Variable (usually in April)

Semana Santa

In Haina, on the city's western outskirts, you'll find a Hispanicized version of the Haitian Semana Santa festivities also found in the *bateyes*. On the morning of Ash Wednesday, go to the Zona Colonial's Iglesia del Carmen, where a statue of Christ is paraded through the streets, serenaded and draped in money.

Seven weeks after Semana Santa

Espíritu Santo

A full week of religious processions and conga drums in Villa Mella, certainly the most spirited and visually interesting of the local festivals.

First Sunday before June 13

San Antonio

Large, culturally authentic festival in the rural northern suburb of Yamasá. The

game, or you can purchase in advance on Wednesday for the weekly Sunday games at locations across the island – see local newspapers for up-to-date ticket purchasing locations. Though more and more Dominican major-leaguers are opting out of the winter season, you'll still find a few famous Dominican players along with some of America's top minor-league prospects.

Most foreign visitors find **cockfighting**, the other local obsession, less easy to stomach, but it's a central part of Dominican culture. The city's grand **Coliséo Gallístico**, Zona Industrial Herrera, Av Luperón just south of the Autopista Duarte (RD$250 for ground floor, RD$100 for first-floor stands; ☎565-3844), practically transforms this traditionally rural pastime into something of an upper-class diversion; indeed, semi-formal dress is required. There are plenty of other, smaller venues spread across the city's outer barrios, but this is by far the best place for visitors to come.

Finally, the entire city is dotted with **pool halls**. The best places to shoot a few games are the second-floor halls that you'll find along El Conde – though as with most male-dominated Dominican hangouts, the atmosphere is hyper-macho.

Hermanos Guillen pump a lot of money into this festival (including free food and drink for everyone) with the purpose of preserving traditional rural Dominican musical forms *gagá*, *gajumbe* and *bambulá*.

Last two weeks of July

Merengue Festival

Loud outdoor concerts on the Malecón by big-name *merengueros*, plus traditional accordion merengue groups performing at the Palacio de Bellas Artes and merengue-based "folklore" shows at the National Theatre that feature the *Vodú*-based *palos* musicians of Villa Mella with the National Folklore Ballet.

September 15–24

Virgen de las Mercedes

Syncretic religious ceremony and neighbourhood street party in Mata Los Indios near Villa Mella. Famous for its African-style drumming and music.

September 29

San Miguel

Fiesta patronal in honour of one of the country's most important saints, celebrated in Villa Mella and the Zona Colonial's barrio San Miguel. A large procession carries an effigy of the saint accompanied by drums and *gagá* band.

October 7

Fiesta Oriental

The eastern side of the city had the first recorded Dominican Carnival (1520) and in recent years the Zona Oriental now finally has its share of festivities again. This massive Carnival in honour of the barrios east of the Ozama is heavier on the African syncretic elements of Dominican culture than the February event, including traditional local dances like the *mandinga* and *bailan pri-pri*, as well as *guloya* performances from the Cocolos of San Pedro. Runs the length of Av Venezuela and ends up in Parque Mirador del Este.

Shops and galleries

High-end boutiques and shopping plazas spread outward from the **Plaza Central** at 27 de Febrero and Troncoso, marking the city's main shopping district. More tourist-oriented shops can be found along **El Conde** in the Zona Colonial, which is also home to the city's best **bookstores**. Most Dominicans shop for clothing and electronics at the budget stores that line **Avenida Duarte**, especially La Sirena, Mella 258 and Duarte, which has inexpensive counterfeit designer clothes purchased en masse at the markets along the Haitian border. **Art galleries** are spread throughout the city; of special note is Galería Elín, the outstanding Haitian art gallery in the Zona Colonial. **Hours** for stores and shops in Santo Domingo are typically Mon–Sat 9.30am–noon and 2.30–5.30pm. Most (though not all) are closed on Sunday.

Clothing, jewellery and accessories

El Mamey Isabela 157 ☎688-0236. Otherwise humdrum gift shop that's a good place to find authentic Carnival masks from La Vega.

Mundo Artesenal El Conde and Duarte ☎688-3889. Snazzy jewellery and arts shop where the designers rent stalls within. This makes the quality a bit uneven, with high-end designer jewellery competing for space with somewhat tacky paintings and pottery.

Museo de Ámbar El Conde 107 at Parque Colón ⓣ221-1333. Excellent but pricey jewellery shop with the highest-quality amber and larimar pieces in the city, including some amber with insects suspended inside them and knock-off colonial coins made into necklaces and bracelets. There's also a museum on the first floor (see p.60) and it's set in the oldest colonial home on the park.

Museo Larimar Dominicano Isabela la Católica 54 ⓣ689-6605, ⓦwww.larimarmuseum.com. A generous selection of all manner of quality larimar jewellery; see p.62 for more on the museum itself.

Museo Mundo de Ámbar Meriño 452 and Restauración ⓣ686-5700, ⓦwww.amberworldmuseum.com. This amber museum actually has a better exhibit than the one on Parque Duarte and a comparable gift shop stocked with all sorts of amber jewellery.

Plaza Central 27 de Febrero and Troncoso. Large mall with all the standard shops, including clothing, shoe and CD stores as well as a large cinema; live concert-band music on Sun at 6pm in front of the mall.

Joyería DiCarlo El Conde and Meriño. High-end jewellery shop on Parque Colón that's a cut above the usual tourist-shop fare. Features quality amber and larimar offerings, but also a range of stylish gold and silver earrings and necklaces.

Speciality shops

Casa Francia Cigar Shop Vicioso 103 and Calle de las Damas. Small set up in the lobby shows the entire process of growing and rolling cigars, with boxes of cigars for sale.

Casa Weber Prudhomme 64. Speciality bookstore set in a beautiful old building, catering to local intellectuals, with good sections on Spanish poetry, Dominican history and the history of the local feminist movement.

Cohiba Hecho a Mano El Conde 109 at Parque Colón ⓣ685-6425. Cohiba outlet with a variety of top cigars at reasonable prices. There's also a cigar roller on hand to teach you to roll your own cigars.

Librería America Arz. Nouel 251. All sorts of secondhand books, some tourism-oriented, others on Dominican culture and letters.

Librería La Trinitaria Arz. Nouel 160 and José Reyes. Best of the many small bookshops that surround El Conde, with a host of great Spanish-language tomes on every aspect of Dominican life and culture imaginable.

Musicalia El Conde 464. This renowned bachata record outlet has the best of the Dominican golden oldies, including operatic favourites Eduardo Brito and María Montéz, old *bachateros* like Luis Segura and *típico merengueros* from Francisco Ulloa to Tavito Vasquez.

Thesaurus Lincoln 305 at Sarasota ⓦwww.thesaurus.com.do. Great two-storey bookstore with lots of English-language volumes and a popular little espresso café on the second floor.

Galleries

Galería de Arte Nader Rafael Sánchez 22 and Geraldino ⓣ544-0878. Most prestigious of the Gazcue art galleries, displaying big-name contemporary Dominican painters.

Galeriá Bidó Dr Báez 5 ⓣ685-5310. Art gallery set on a residential block, run by the famous Dominican painter, with a selection of his own work and exhibits from other Dominican modernists like Picasso-influenced Cristian Tiburcio – whose massive sculptures of musicians flank the gallery's front door. See p.72 for more information.

Galería Elín Meriño 203 and El Conde ⓣ688-7100. The best Haitian paintings in the country, with prices half what you would pay in North America or western Europe and covering a broad spectrum of media and styles. This is the first place to look for serious Haitian art (see p.60).

Listings

Airlines In the city: Air Canada, Churchill 63 ⓣ541-0908, ⓦwww.aircanada.com; Air France, Máximo Gómez 15 ⓣ686-8432, ⓦwww.airfrance.com; American, Churchill 2 ⓣ542-7754, ⓦwww.aa.com; Caribair, Av Luperón ⓣ826-4400, ⓦwww.caribair.com.do; Continental, Edificio In Tempo, Av Churchill ⓣ262-1060, ⓦwww.continental.com; Cubana, 27 de Febrero 227 and Tiradentes ⓣ227-2040, ⓦwww.cubana.cu; JetBlue ⓣ273-2757, ⓦwww.jetblue.com; Lufthansa, Malecón 353 ⓣ689-9625, ⓦwww.lufthansa.com; United, Ricart 54 ⓣ541-8072, ⓦwww.united.com.

Ambulance Dial ⓣ911 in case of emergency; for private ambulance call Movimed (ⓣ532-0000).

Banks Banco BHD (with Visa advance machines), Arz. Nouel 456 at Parque Independencia; Duarte and Ovando. Banco de Reservas (with 24hr ATMs), Av Duarte 38 and Mella; Calle Mercedes and Isabela la Católica; Malecón and

Máximo Gömez. Banco del Progreso, Duarte & Jimenez, Independencia & Sánchez. Citibank (24hr ATMs), Av Independencia 557, Betancourt 333. Scotiabank (24hr ATMs), Av Duarte and Mella; Calle Isabela la Católica and Mercedes, San Martín 9.

Car rental Budget, Av Kennedy Km 6 ⓣ566-6666; Dollar, Independencia 366 ⓣ221-7368, ⓦwww.dollar.com.do; Hertz, Independencia 454/JM Heredia ⓣ221-5333; Honda, Kennedy and Pepillo Salcedo ⓣ567-1015.

Currency exchange There are plenty of small exchanges in the Zona Colonial, though withdrawing out of an ATM bank machine will get you a better exchange rate. If you don't have a bank card, go to the exchange desk at Caribe Tours, 27 de Febrero and Navarro, which offers the city's best rates. Avoid any dealings with exchangers who approach you on the street, as rip-offs and counterfeit pesos are standard practice.

Dental For 24hr service go to Dr Melchor Fernandez, Plaza Central on Churchill and 27 de Febrero, suite 365 ⓣ547-3902.

Embassies Canada, Churchill 1099 ⓣ262-3100; United Kingdom, 27 de Febrero 233 ⓣ472-7111; United States, Nicolás Pensión and Navarro ⓣ221-2171. There is no consular representation for Australia or New Zealand.

Film processing Grupo Digital, El Conde 360; Fotosol, Los Proceres 38. Both offer 24hr developing and have an array of film for sale.

Hospitals The best hospital by far and with English-speaking staff is Centro Médico Semma, Perdomo and Joaquín Peres ⓣ686-1503, ⓦcmssd.com.do; Clínica Abreu, Beller 42 ⓣ688-4411.

Internet Café Internet, Ovando 100; Centro Internet, multiple locations including Capotillo 10, Fiallo 53, Sánchez 82; Verizon, El Conde 203. Rates run about RD$1 per minute. Free wi-fi in the lobbies of all the Malecón and many of the Zona Colonial hotels.

Laundry Lavaseco, Independencia 208; Nacional, Santomé 401; San Miguel, 27 de Febrero 21. Count on around US$3 per large load. Otherwise hotels often offer a laundry service, though they generally charge by the piece and are much more expensive.

Mobile phones You can buy Orange sim cards for US$10, or phone cards that you can use on your mobile phone from home, in denominations from RD$50 and up. The sim card is really the best way to go as the international rates are slightly better and all incoming calls are free. They're sold at kiosks across the city and by hundreds of vendors on the street.

Pharmacies There are 24hr pharmacies at Carol, Ricart 24 (ⓣ562-6767) and Duarte 305 (ⓣ536-0363); San Judas Tadeo, Independencia 57 (ⓣ622-3012).

Police The central police station is on Independencia (ⓣ682-3151). More convenient is the small tourist police station on El Conde and José Reyes. Dial ⓣ911 in case of emergency.

Post office The main office is on Héroes de Luperón just off the Malecón (Mon–Fri 8am–5pm, Sat 8am–noon; ⓣ534-5838). You may also try the office at Casa de Abogados on Parque Colón (Mon–Fri 8am–5pm, Sat 8am–noon).

Taxis Apolo (ⓣ537-0000) is the best taxi service in town. You can trust them to charge a fair price, typically RD$150–300. Other reliable operators include City (ⓣ565-9595), Maxi (ⓣ544-0077), Millennium (ⓣ532-0303) and Tropical (ⓣ540-4446).

Telephone Telephone centres are spread throughout the city and are open daily 9am–10pm, including Verizon, El Conde 203, Malecón at El Napolitano and Bolivar and 30 de Marzo; Televimenca, Av Lincoln 306 and Sarasota; Tricom, Hermanas Mirabal 127 and Máximo Gómez one block south of Bolivar; and Turitel. The going rate is RD$6/minute to North America, RD$16 to Europe, RD$3.5 for calls within the country.

Wiring money Western Union, El Conde and Espaillat; Av Lincoln 306 and Sarasota (Mon–Sat 9.30am–noon & 2–5pm).

Moving on from Santo Domingo

Santo Domingo is the transport centre of the country and even the smallest villages at the far end of the north coast are connected to it by either **bus routes** or **guaguas**. If driving, you may have a more difficult time getting out of the city than anticipated as the **traffic** can be tremendously heavy and the highways are insufficiently signposted.

Major bus and guagua routes

Destination	Bus and operator	Guagua
Azua (for Lago Enriquillo)	8+ daily; 2hr 30min; C, TV	Hourly; 2hr 40min
Barahona	4 daily; 3hr 40min; C	Hourly; 4hr 10min
Bávaro	4 daily; 3hr 30min; EB	–
Boca Chica	–	Frequent; 40min
Cabrera	8 daily; 6hr 30min; C	–
Castillo	9 daily; 4hr; C	–
Dajabón	6 daily; 5hr 15min; C	–
Duvergé	–	5hr 10min
Guayacanes	10 daily; 4hr 40min; C	–
Higüey	–	2hr 45min
Jarabacoa	4 daily; 2hr 30min; C	–
Juan Dolio	–	Frequent; 1hr 20min
La Romana	–	Frequent; 2hr
La Vega	Frequent; 1hr 45min; C, EV	Frequent; 2hr 20min
Las Terrenas	5 daily; 3hr; TS	–
Loma de Cabrera	3 daily; 6hr 15min; C	–
Monte Cristi	6 daily; 4hr 30min; C	–
Pedernales		4 daily; 6hr 15min
Puerto Plata	7 daily; 3hr 30min; C, M	Frequent; 5hr
Río San Juan	8 daily; 3hr 45min; C	–
Samaná	8 daily; 4 via San Francisco de Macorís – 4hr 30min. 4 Express bus 2hr 30min via autopista; C	4 daily; 3hr 30min
San Francisco de Macorís	14 daily; 3hr 10min; C	Frequent; 3hr
San Juan de la Maguana (for Las Matas de Farfán)	7 daily; 3hr 50min; C, TV	8 daily; 4hr 30min
San Pedro de Macorís (for La Romana)	–	Frequent; 1hr 30min
Sánchez	8 daily; 4 via San Francisco de Macorís 4hr; 4 Express via autopista 2hr; C	Hourly: 3hr 30min
Santiago	Frequent; 2hr 15min; C, M	Frequent; 2hr 30min
Sosúa (for Cabarete)	Hourly; 4hr 10min; C, M	Hourly; 4hr 10min

C = Caribe Tours; EB = Expreso Bávaro; M = Metro Tours; TV = Transporte del Valle; TS = Transporte Samaná; EV = Expreso Vegano

By public transport

Caribe Tours (Av 27 de Febrero and Leopoldo Navarro; Ⓦwww.caribetours.com.do) has by far the most connections, stopping at towns along the Autopista Duarte on its way to Santiago, then Puerto Plata and Sosúa, as well as nearly every region in the country, save the southeast and the southwest past Barahona. **Metro** (Av Winston Churchill and Hatuey; Ⓦwww.metroserviciosturisticas.com) can take you to Santiago, Puerto Plata and Sosúa. Other operators do a more regional trade: **Expreso Bávaro** (Av Máximo Gómez in front of the Supermercado Nacional; Ⓣ552-1678) shuttles between the capital and Bávaro, while **Transporte Samaná** (Plaza Lama, Av Duarte; Ⓣ687-1470) makes the journey to and from Las Terrenas. La Vega and San Juan de la Managua can be reached with Caribe but the routes are also serviced by **Expreso Vegano** (Av 27 de Febrero and San Martín; Ⓣ685-9160) and **Transporte del Valle** (Av Independencia behind Parque Independencia; Ⓣ557-6200) respectively. **Terrabus** (Guarouya 4; Ⓣ531-0383) has daily connections from the capital to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Caribe Tours and Metro have free printed schedules available at their terminals and timetables on their websites, but the table above gives the latest journey times and frequencies at the time of writing. Buses depart from the depot of the relevant operator.

If you are planning on travelling by **guagua**, you'll find that the majority of them arrive at and depart from Parque Enriquillo, with stops along the Malecón for destinations to the east and west. All guagua journey times given are rough estimates.

By car

To head **north** and **west**, take the 27 de Febrero elevated highway west through town until you arrive at the large traffic circle with a bronze monumental arch in its centre and head north. This road leads to the Autopista Duarte (north) and a turnoff 500m after the traffic circle will take you to the Carretera 6 de Noviembre, which leads to San Cristóbal and parts west. Those heading **east** from the city should also get on 27 de Febrero – but this time heading east – which crosses the Río Ozama as the Duarte Bridge and then turns into the Carretera las Américas, skirting the ocean all the way to San Pedro and beyond.

Around Santo Domingo

Beyond the belt of industrial barrios that encases Santo Domingo are a variety of **day-trips** within easy striking distance, none of them on a list of top must-dos, but good diversions nevertheless. History buffs will enjoy scavenging the western barrios for the impressive bits of colonial architecture that still stand, mostly in the form of the substantial ruins of four separate sixteenth-century **sugar mills**. You'll need your own wheels to get there, though, tucked away as they are in relatively out-of-the-way places. Those looking for a slice of Caribbean beach life should head to **Boca Chica**, an overcrowded resort town 10km east of the airport, about halfway between Santo Domingo and San Pedro de Macorís; you might do better continuing along the highway to **Juan Dolio**, where there is more beachfront albeit dominated by all-inclusive hotels and its sister town **Guayacanes**, with its great beaches and lack of tourist development.

West of Santo Domingo

Four remote **colonial ruins** lie hidden among the rambling, semi-rural barrios west of the city, nearly impossible to reach via public transport. West of barrio Manoguayabo, the ruins of the grand **Palavé manor**, a typical sixteenth-century sugar hacienda, are the best maintained of the bunch. Named Palais Bel during Haitian rule, its masonry and brick facade were restored in the 1970s and still boast bits of the old Andalucian whitewash and a prominent parapet. Three Romanesque portals lead into the large, central room; the beam above the doorways once supported a second-floor balcony. The easiest way to get there is to take the Autopista Duarte and turn left at the Manoguayabo turnoff. Just past the town, take the right-hand fork in the road and head 3km beyond Hato Nuevo to the village Buena Noche; a left at the kerosene station leads 100m to the ruins.

The extensive remains of another sugar mill, **Engombe**, on the Río Haina, are overgrown with weeds. Mentioned by Oviedo in his 1534 *History of the Indies* as the colony's leading mill, the manor and adjoining chapel are for the most part still intact. The mansion's militaristic, rectangular facade was originally fortified to protect against slave rebellion – here and there along the wall you'll see foundations of the spiked limestone barrier. The double Romanesque portals on both floors lead to the open main room, which is connected to two galleries and an interior staircase that now leads to nowhere. Beside the house is the large chapel with two frames – a polygonal apse and a leaning sacristy. A brief spate of renovation by Santo Domingo's Catholic University in 1963 restored its original Moorish tiled roof, but the buildings have since fallen back into neglect. Fifty metres further down the road you'll find the scattered ruins of the slave barracks and the mill in a family's garden. The easiest way to Engombe is to take the Carretera San Cristóbal west from Santo Domingo and make a right turn on an unmarked dirt turnoff just before the Río Haina (for which you'll have to keep a very careful eye out), then a left at the fork in the road.

Due west of Santo Domingo, 13km along the coast, **Boca de Nigua** holds the ruins of two more colonial sugar mills. The 1785 **Hermitage de San Gregorio**, a simple church that's still the local parish, was the site of prayer for both owners and slaves of the **Ingenio Boca de Nigua**, another 250m south past the town cemetery, an enormous mill and boiling room for extracting juice for rum. Back up to the hermitage, head 1km west and then turn off at the Pepsi sign to reach **Ingenio Diego Caballero**. It is fenced off while excavations are under way, but you can still see the foundations of the manor and – if you follow the dirt path that skirts the grounds for 50m – the mill. Built in the early sixteenth century by Caballero, Secretary of the Royal Audience during Diego Columbus's reign, the mill was initially powered by a canal dug in from the nearby Río Nigua and temporarily closed in the 1600s when the course of the river changed. The canal has been excavated along with three arched bridges that were built to transport sugar cane from the fields to the mill.

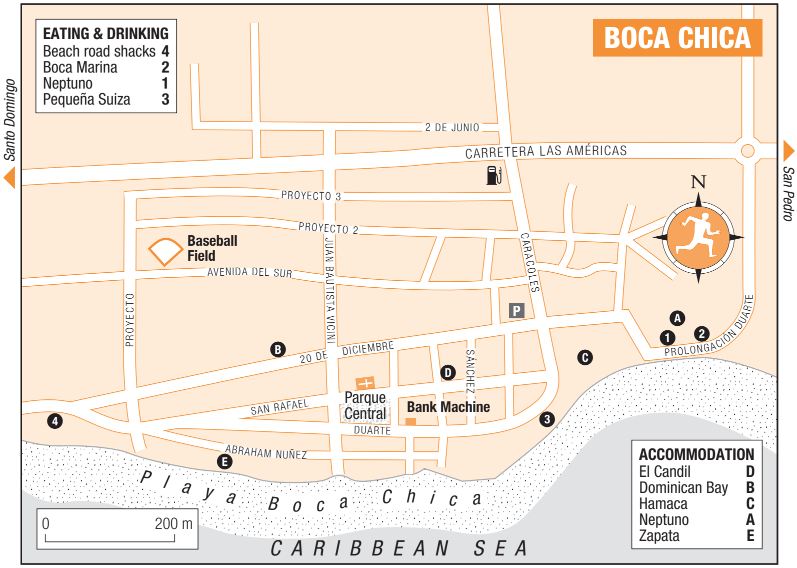
Boca Chica

BOCA CHICA, 25km east of Santo Domingo, curves along a small bay protected by shoals, with wonderfully transparent Caribbean water lapping at a long line of beach shacks serving excellent food. It used to be one of the island's prime swimming spots, but the town that surrounds it has unfortunately become so crowded with freelance guides, sex workers and persistent touts that it's impossible to walk more than a few feet without being accosted by some enterprising individual hell-bent on attaching themselves to you for the duration of your stay.

On weekends the beach is jam-packed with thousands of day-tripping city-dwellers swimming in the sea and dancing to a cacophony of car stereos – which does make for an unforgettable beach party scene. At night, after the Dominicans leave, it devolves into little more than a gringo brothel. Sitting on the **beach** is the main attraction and the waters are low and calm enough to walk out to the bird-inhabited mangrove island **La Matica** just off shore. If you tire of swimming and sunbathing, you could opt for a more rigorous activity like **scuba diving**. Regular trips are led by Caribbean Divers at Duarte 28 (ⓣ854-3483, ⓦwww.caribbeandivers.de; US$30–65), a PADI- and PDIC-certified outfit. Dives head out to **La Caleta Submarine National Park**, a protected nearby coral reef at the bottom of which lie two sunken ships: the *Hickory*, once a treasure-hunting ship that salvaged two Spanish **shipwrecks** but now home to thousands of tropical sea creatures; and a bizarre-looking vehicle called "The UFO", which is touted on the tour as being potentially extraterrestrial, but in fact is an old oil rig. Other diving excursions go to the waters off Bayahibe, Isla Catalina and a **cave dive** near Santo Domingo; they also do **deep-sea fishing** excursions and **water-sports** such as sailing, surfing and snorkelling.

Arrival and information

Guaguas drop off and pick up from the petrol station *Burger King* at the entrance to town on the coastal highway; from there you can get an RD$10 guagua or *motoconcho* ride to either your hotel or the beach. It takes about 20min to get here from the airport by public transport, about an hour from Santo Domingo. If you need **transport** while in Boca Chica, go to the taxi stand on Duarte and Hungria on the west side of the town strip, although pretty much everything you'll need is within a short walk of the beach. Calle Duarte holds all the major services you might require while in town: a Banco Popular **ATM**, several phone centres, a **supermarket**, a **pharmacy**, half a dozen **internet** centres (RD$40/hr) and a clinic. The **tourist office** is on Vicini and 20 de Diciembre, while the police station is on Mella on the Parque Central.


BOCA CHICA
EATING & DRINKING
Beach road shacks 4
Boca Marina 2
Neptuno 1
Pequeña Suiza 3
ACCOMMODATION
El Candil D
Dominican Bay B
Hamaca C
Neptuno A
Zapata E
Santo Domingo
San Pedro
N
2 DE JUNIO
CARRETERA LAS AMÉRICAS
PROYECTO 3
PROYECTO 2
Baseball Field
AVENIDA DEL SUR
JUAN BAUTISTA VICINI
CARACOLES
PROYECTO
20 DE DICIEMBRE
SÁNCHEZ
PROLONGACIÓN DUARTE
SAN RAFAEL
Parque Central
Bank Machine
DUARTE
ABRAHAM NUÑEZ
Playa Boca Chica
CARIBBEAN SEA
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Accommodation

You'll find plenty of hotels in Boca Chica, most of which are rarely full; the only time you might have trouble finding a room in the hotel of your choice is in January or February. Of the three **all-inclusive** hotels, two are set directly on the beach, though the third, the *Dominican Bay*, is the best of the bunch. More plentiful (and cheaper) are the small **hostels** set up by both European expats and locals all across town.

Dominican Bay Vicini and 20 de Diciembre ⓣ412-2001, ⓦwww.hotetur.com. Best of the local all-inclusive resorts, with beautiful grounds, the cleanest and most modern rooms, helpful service and good buffet food. Set back two blocks from the beach, which is a bit of a disadvantage, but much quieter as a result. ⑥

El Candil García off 20 de Diciembre ⓣ523-4252. One of the best properties in Boca Chica, though it invariably changes management every other year or so. What continue are the extremely nice rooms and a tree-shaded pool area. If you're looking for a tranquil little hotel, this is the perfect spot. ④

Hamaca Duarte 26 ⓣ523-4611, ⓦwww.hilton.com. All-inclusive recently upgraded by the Hilton chain, split between a main building and *Hamaca Gardens*, a complex of beachfront villas. They do have private balcony rooms, a/c and cable TV. Other amenities include a casino, five bars, good food for an all-inclusive and free snorkelling equipment. They also have the best disco in Boca Chica. ⑥

Neptuno Prolongación Duarte 15 ⓣ523-9934. Comfortable rooms in an ambling space, nice staff and good privacy makes this a pleasant place to stay, though it's a bit of a walk off the main strip. They also have a couple of full-service apartments. ⑤

Zapata Abraham Núnez 27 ⓣ523-4777, ⓔg.zapata@verizon.net.do. This hotel has some serious upside for independent travellers, including a huge, secluded beachfront bar, doorman, good showers and free breakfast for guests staying two nights or more. ⑤

Eating and drinking

There are several quality **restaurants** in Boca Chica, but the best place to eat during the day is at one of the food shacks serving fresh seafood dishes on the beach; if you go to one of these, try the great local *lambí criolla* (creole conch). As for the **bars**, they're all along the festive main strip Calle Duarte, but come in and out of business with alarming rapidity – usually because of intermittent police raids. The **nightlife** scene here is quite rowdy and focused primarily on sex tourism. The only real exception is the disco at the *Hamaca* hotel, which is popular with wealthy twentysomethings from the capital.

Boca Marina Prolongación Duarte 12 ⓣ523-6702. The best service in town along with fantastic seafood that's relatively expensive but well worth it. Try the red snapper, dorado filet or heaping plates of grilled shrimp, ceviches and fried calamari. The waterfront setting is also ideal; if you bring your bathing suit, you can jump off the edge of the restaurant and swim between courses.

Hamaca Duarte 26. The *Hamaca Beach Resort* disco pulls in huge crowds from Santo Domingo and the surrounding barrios, largely because it offers an open bar once you pay the US$10 cover.

Neptuno Prolongación Duarte 8 ⓣ523-4703. Popular gourmet seafood restaurant with great views of the ocean. Terrific mixed seafood platters, lobster ravioli and prawns. Booking recommended at weekends.

Pequeña Suiza Duarte 56 ⓣ523-4619. Pleasant spot for a snack, with an eclectic mix of antipasti, fondue and cappuccino. Also good for a croissant or brioche with fresh orange juice at breakfast.

Juan Dolio and Guayacanes

Just east past Boca Chica begins a 25km-long stretch of rocky coast that holds a strip of holiday homes and all-inclusives collectively referred to as **JUAN DOLIO**. This package resort area was created in response to the wild success of Playa Dorada in the early 1980s, but has never quite matched its northern rival. There has been some recent investment in the area and although a couple of new resorts are the equal of any all-inclusives in the country, the quality of the beach lets the side down. Though the sand here is perfectly acceptable, the expanse of dead coral under the water makes swimming and walking in the water uncomfortable, and the private hotel beaches are isolated, small pockets of sand – simply no match for what you'll find further east at Punta Cana and Bávaro. The sands are significantly more appealing in the nearby hamlet of **GUAYACANES**, Juan Dolio's next-door neighbour, with two nice beaches and one of the best restaurants on the island.

Juan Dolio does have a few advantages over its regional competitors. There's none of the large-scale harassment of Boca Chica and wandering around the strip is relatively hassle-free. Unlike Bávaro, there are a number of quality restaurants and budget hotels geared towards **independent travellers**, the nightlife is good and the strip is still in shouting distance of Santo Domingo.

If you're up for some out-of-the-way natural beauty, head 3km further west of Guayacanes (the spot is marked by a highway overpass on your right) and you'll find a long-abandoned beach home with a **natural swimming pool** that was carved into the rock by its former owners. It's perfectly safe to swim in the pool, which has rough-hewn steps leading into it from the ground and from here you can look out onto the Caribbean crashing against high, jagged cliffs.

Arrival and information

You can reach Juan Dolio from Santo Domingo within an hour and a half by guagua (RD$100; every ten minutes or so, less frequent after around 5pm). There are multiple drop-off points but most routes end at the entrance to Villas del Mar, about 12km east of Boca Chica, a broad pot-holed avenue lined with hotels, internet kiosks, ATMs, souvenir shops, a pharmacy and the like. Stretching west of Villas del Mar is a narrower seaside road that rambles past mostly private beach homes.

Guayacanes is 7km west along the Carretera Las Américas. Guaguas pass by the town entrance. The eastern side is largest and sees the most bustle, with multiple **beach shacks** offering cold beer and grilled fish during the day.

Accommodation

There are two classes of **hotel** in Juan Dolio: the all-inclusives catering to package tourists and the smaller independent hotels. Of these, the independents win on both atmosphere and quality of food – and provide you with greater freedom of movement. The all-inclusives, though, do have their own advantages for those who can tolerate the buffet food – everything you'll need is provided free of charge inside the compound and they even have free transport from the airport. Addresses on the Carretera Las Américas reflect distance, in kilometres, from San Pedro de Macorís to the east.

Barceló Capella Villas del Mar, Carretera Las Américas Km 14 ☎526-1080, ⓔh.capella@verizon.net.do. Expansive grounds, 500 quality rooms with private balcony, friendly service and a casino. The "beach" is a small strip of cement covered in sand but it's probably the best of the all-inclusives along the strip. Keep in mind, though, that a reservation here does not guarantee you'll be staying here. They routinely overbook and then ship the excess guests off to the lesser Barceló hotels in Juan Dolio. ⑤

Coral Costa Caribe Carretera Las Américas Km 14 ☎526-2244, ⓔcoralcostacaribe@hotmail.com. Nice motel rooms decked out in garish purple, with double beds and all standard amenities. The food here is far better than what you'll get at most all-inclusives, but the place is run like a factory – so you shouldn't expect great service. There's also a 24hr sports bar and a casino. ⑦

Don Pedro Marina 50 ☎526-2147. A very basic, independent cheapie geared toward backpackers who don't mind the spartan rooms. US$15 extra for hot water and a/c. ①

Fior di Loto Calle Principal 517 ☎526-1146, ⓔhfdiloto@verizon.net.do. Best budget hotel in Juan Dolio and a hangout for independent travellers. The India-themed rooms are simple but comfortable and fun, with visitors adding to the ornate Far-Eastern patterns painted on the walls. All rooms have hot water, cable TV and fan; some also boast kitchenettes. In addition to the usual amenities, they also have a hot tub and a sun deck. ③

Playa Esmeralda Carretera Las Américas Km 36 ☎526-3434, Ⓦwww.hotelplayaesmeralda.com. Extremely nice, quiet hotel far off the main Juan Dolio strip and closer to the village of Guayacanes. The beach here is far better than what you'll find in the main resort zone (with plenty of good snorkelling) and the grounds are quite private and swarming with songbirds. Spacious, well-kept rooms have all the usual amenities. ⑤

Eating

Outside of the all-inclusives, the **food** in Juan Dolio is actually not bad, with three **Italian restaurants** of some merit along the main road. But you certainly shouldn't leave here without trying the food at *Deli Swiss* in Guayacanes. You'll also find plenty of little espresso bars in the morning and can pick up **groceries** at the small supermarket inside Plaza Chocolate on Calle Central.

Deli Swiss Playa Guayacanes, at the west end of town. Doesn't look like much from the outside, but tables are set up along a rocky outcrop on the beach and the gourmet seafood dishes served are among the best on the island. There's no menu – you are served the catch of the day – but options typically include outlandishly good grilled langostinas and fresh local fish. A good if startlingly pricey spot for a romantic evening with meals typically runs around US$50 per person.

Fior di Loto Calle Principal 517 ☎526-1146, Ⓔhfdiloto@verizon.net.do. Good pastas (*aglio olio*, *carbonara*, *arrabiata*, you name it), several excellent shrimp dishes and Indian curries suitably priced for budget travellers at around US$12.

Grotta Azzurra Calle Principal 326. Italian restaurant notable for its singular seaside ambience, which is indeed evocative of the Isle of Capri. Specialities include grilled lobster, spaghetti *al vongole* and the obligatory *caprese* salad of fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil. Relatively pricey because of the setting (around US$25).

Restaurant El Sueño Calle Principal 330. The most elegant restaurant in Juan Dolio and a bit more expensive than its competitors, this delightful little restaurant is set on an outdoor patio with white linen tablecloths and impeccable service. Try the chicken *scallopini* in white wine sauce, filet of bass in mushroom sauce or grilled dorado.

Drinking and nightlife

There's not much nightlife in Juan Dolio, but you will find half a dozen local hangouts that can be fun when they get busy.

Café Giulia Villas del Mar 288. The place to go on Mon nights, this unassuming little outdoor bar faces the street with a small dancing area. Features mostly American music with merengue thrown into the mix.

Chocolate Bar Calle Central 127. Outdoor terrace fronting the Plaza Chocolate with a pool table and crowds on weekends.

Wood Madera Café Villas del Mar 400. Without a doubt the hippest bar in the Juan Dolio area, with avant garde live music and video most nights, great bartenders and cool, over-the-top vibe.

Listings

Bank Half a dozen ATMs along Villas del Mar, as well as one at Plaza Chocolate.

Car Avis is located at the highway entrance at Km 13 near the Barceló resorts. For taxi service call ☎526-8507.

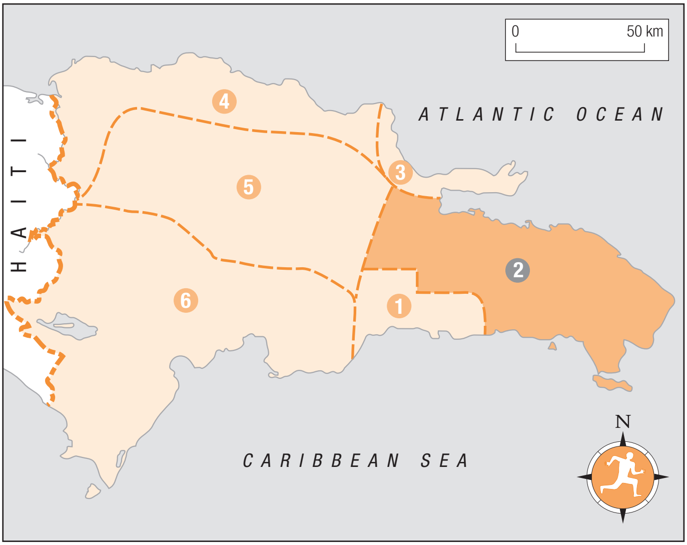
Internet Internet Center Amigos, Calle Villas del Mar between *Café Giulia* and the *Playa Real Hotel*; RD$1/min.

Pharmacy There are pharmacies along Villas del Mar as well as Plaza Chocolate.

Telephone Verizon, Calle Villas del Mar.

2

The southeast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CHAPTER 2

Highlights

✱ **Bayahibe** Unwind in this picturesque fishing village, enjoying a candelit dinner on the beach or a sundowner from one of a handful of casual bars overlooking the bay. **See p.107**

✱ **Boat trips to Isla Saona** Embark on a memorable day-trip to this wildlife reserve within Parque Nacional del Este, boasting untrammelled wilderness, beautiful beaches and manatees. **See p.111**

✱ **Boca de Yuma** Passed over by package tours, this laid-back seafront village has bluffs with crashing surf, good fishing and caving, and the fortified lair of conquistador Ponce de León. **See p.113**

✱ **Laguna Limón** Take a fishing boat out on this tranquil lake fringed with wetlands and brimming with birdlife. **See p.122**

✱ **Cueva Funfún** One of the largest caves on the island features an otherworldly subterranean landscape with roaring underground rivers, towering stalactites and countless bats. **See p.125**

✱ **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** Boat rides lead through a surreal snarl of mangrove swamps and prehistoric caves. **See p.127**

▲ Isla Saona

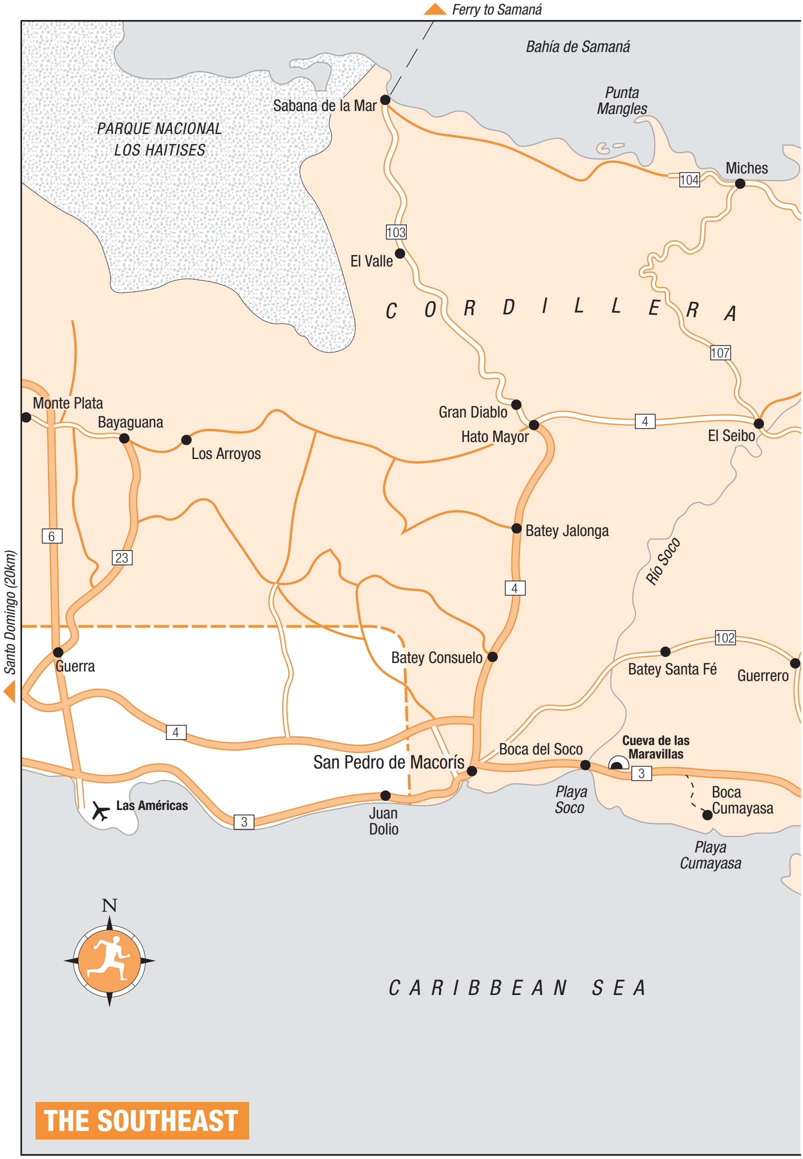
2

The southeast

The Santo Domingo valley stretches east from the capital along the Caribbean coast all the way to the Mona Passage, the body of water separating the Dominican Republic from Puerto Rico, encompassing vast tracts of **sugar cane** along the way, once practically the nation's sole source of hard currency. North of these fields roll the verdant high hills of the Cordillera Oriental – really a final spur of the Cordillera Central – which themselves terminate at the bowl-shaped swamp basin of **Parque Nacional Los Haitises**. This sizeable region is the Dominican Republic's southeast, known primarily for its popular **Punta Cana** resort zone, a 45km strip of idyllic, uninterrupted sand lined with all-inclusive hotels that are far less expensive than what you'll find around most of the Caribbean. While these beaches may be a bit remote for extensive day-tripping and countryside exploration, they do make perfect spots for utterly relaxing holidays. And the upgrading of the region's roads – which has seen much of the coastal highway widened, and the start of a new highway through to Punta Cana – means that the whole area is becoming ever more accessible.

Aside from the large resort area, the southeast is fairly poor, rural and somewhat bereft of must-see sights – with the notable exception of the two national parks that help frame the region. One of these, **Parque Nacional del Este**, protruding into the Caribbean at the southeastern tip of the Dominican Republic, more or less continues the theme of great beachfront, especially along the remarkable nature reserve on **Isla Saona**. Nearby, you can visit three **cave systems** – Peñon Gordo, Del Puente, José and Padre Nuestro – though the extensive Taino rock art that these caves hold is mostly off-limits to tourists. Not far to the west, the pretty seaside village **Bayahibe**, the latest centre of all-inclusive construction, is the best base from which to visit the park's various points of interest. At the northwestern edge of the region, the mangrove swamps of **Parque Nacional Los Haitises**, on the Bahía de Samaná, hide several Taino caves visited on boat trips organized from towns both in the southeast and on the Samaná Peninsula.

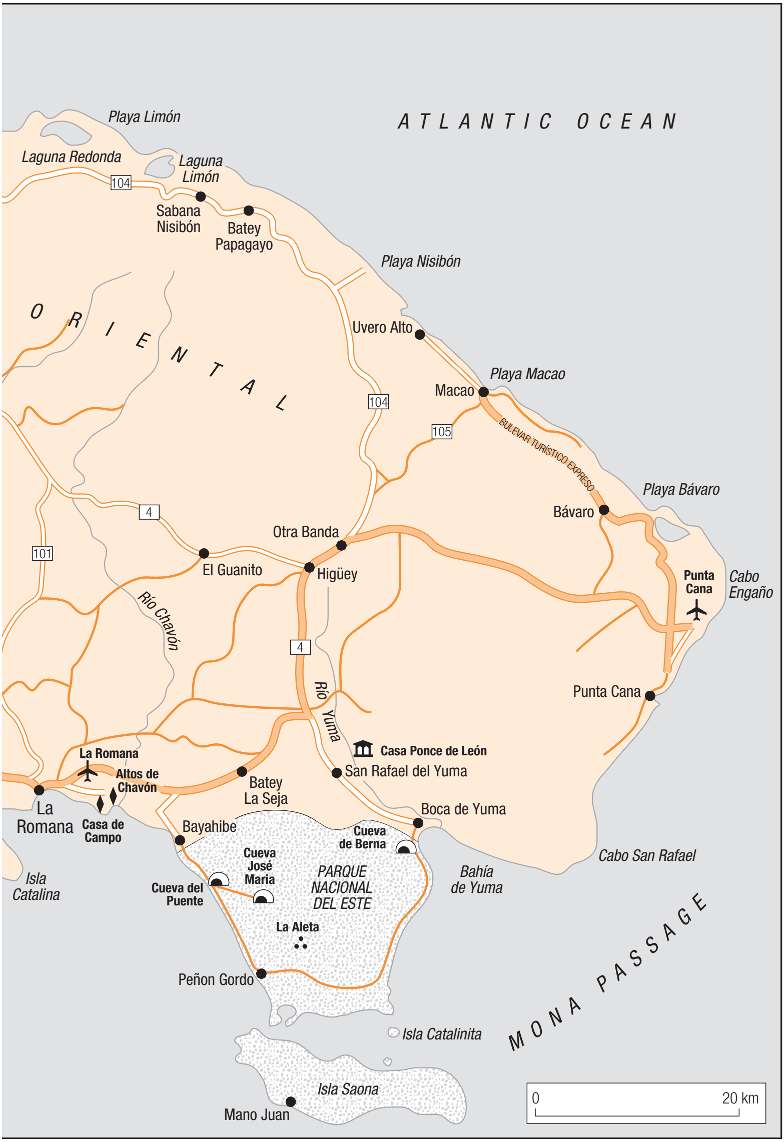
La Romana and **San Pedro de Macorís**, which lie on Highway 3 between Santo Domingo and Parque Nacional del Este, serve as urban exceptions to the backwater feel of much of the region. These two mid-sized towns, which both flourished during the glory era of the sugar industry, have enjoyed contrasting fortunes in recent years. La Romana has grown into a relaxing and prosperous place, having benefited quite a bit from Gulf & Western's investment in local industry and capitalizing on some resort build-up – notably in the vast **Casa de Campo** complex just east of town. San Pedro, on the other hand, is still


Ferry to Samaná
Bahía de Samaná
Sabana de la Mar
Punta Mangles
PARQUE NACIONAL LOS HAITISES
Miches
104
103
El Valle
C O R D I L L E R A
107
Monte Plata
Gran Diablo
Bayaguana
Hato Mayor
4
El Seibo
Los Arroyos
Batey Jalonga
6
23
Río Soco
Santo Domingo (20km)
4
102
Batey Consuelo
Batey Santa Fé
Guerrero
Guerra
4
Cueva de las Maravillas
Boca del Soco
San Pedro de Macorís
3
Playa Soco
Boca Cumayasa
Las Américas
3
Juan Dolio
Playa Cumayasa
N
CARIBBEAN SEA
THE SOUTHEAST

struggling economically despite its widespread reputation for turning out numerous **baseball** professionals – such as home-run king Sammy Sosa – from its poverty-stricken slums.

Some history

It's not entirely surprising that the southeast, save for a few choice spots, seems slightly left behind – at least when its rocky history is considered. Shortly after


ATLANTIC OCEAN
Playa Limón
Laguna Redonda
Laguna Limón
104
Sabana Nisibón
Batey Papagayo
Playa Nisibón
ORIENTAL
Uvero Alto
Playa Macao
Macao
104
105
BULEVAR TURÍSTICO EXPRESO
Playa Bávaro
Bávaro
4
101
Otra Banda
El Guanito
Higüey
Punta Cana
Cabo Engaño
Río Chavón
4
Río Yuma
Punta Cana
Casa Ponce de León
San Rafael del Yuma
La Romana
Altos de Chavón
Batey La Seja
Boca de Yuma
La Romana
Casa de Campo
Bayahibe
Cueva de Berna
Cueva José Maria
Cabo San Rafael
Isla Catalina
Cueva del Puente
PARQUE NACIONAL DEL ESTE
Bahía de Yuma
La Aleta
Peñon Gordo
MONA PASSAGE
Isla Catalinita
Isla Saona
Mano Juan
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20 km

arriving in Santo Domingo, governor **Nicolás de Ovando** waged a particularly brutal campaign of Taino extermination in these parts, and the newly cleared land was quickly settled in 1502 by explorers Ponce de León and Juan Esquivel, who established sugar estates and cattle ranches in the area, while at the same time setting up slave-capturing outposts in Puerto Rico and Jamaica. The one notable relic of the era is **Casa Ponce de León**, the fortified keep of the famous conquistador near the village of Boca de Yuma. In the late sixteenth century, though, the area was abandoned and became home to roaming herds of wild cattle left by the Spanish estates. When the *devastaciones* forcibly moved north-coast settlers into Monte Plata and Bayaguana in 1605 (see p.274), the colonists resorted to hunting the cattle for their livelihood, setting up tanneries and ranches to export leather and beef via Santo Domingo. The rancher ethos is still very present, particularly during the many *fiestas patronales*, which feature long processions of cowboys and livestock parading through the countryside and city streets. This ranching system promoted a less egalitarian economic system than the prosperous family farms of the Cibao Valley, and during the chaotic nineteenth century the Southeast produced most of the *caudillos* – political strongmen who imposed their will on the country by force of arms – who recruited private armies and battled each other for supremacy.

Even as the *caudillos* fought for national power, their economic clout at home was being undermined by the burgeoning **sugar industry**. In the 1860s, Cuban financiers, who had fled a revolution in which their plantations had been burned and their slaves freed, began large-scale sugar production in the eastern Santo Domingo valley; sugar quickly became the country's principal commodity. Former fishing villages San Pedro de Macorís and La Romana were built up into bustling port cities during the Dance of Millions, when American corporations pushed the Cubans out and prices increased tenfold due to World War I, though the global depression of the 1930s wiped out much of the region's prosperity. The revival, spurred on by the construction of the many lavish all-inclusives along the eastern coast, did not really take hold until fairly recently as more and more of the glorious pristine coastline is gobbled up by large-scale tourist developments.

San Pedro de Macorís

The crowded city of **SAN PEDRO DE MACORÍS**, some 70km east of Santo Domingo, owes its uneven development to the boom-and-bust fortunes of the sugar industry. During the crop's glory years in the early twentieth century, grand homes and civic monuments were erected along the eastern bank of the Río Higuamo. Today, with most of the area's mills closed, these buildings are grimy and faded, their dusty facades now absorbed into the squalor of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The town is well known for its **Cocolo festivals** held at Christmas and during the Feast of San Pedro (June 24–30), when two competing troupes of masked dancers known as **mummers** – the Wild Indians of Donald Henderson and Los Momises of now-deceased Primo Shiverton – wander door to door along the major thoroughfares in elaborate costumes adorned with feathers and baubles, and perform dance dramas depicting folk tales, biblical stories and events from Cocolo history (see box opposite), accompanied by fife-and-drum bands.

The decline of sugar prices and continuous urban migration have made the bulk of San Pedro a pretty miserable place, and the first view of its smokestacks and sprawling slums is off-putting to say the least. What redeems it for most residents and visitors alike is its **Malecón**, a wide seaside promenade with modest public beaches at either end, celebrated by *bachata* star Juan Luis Guerra in his song *Guavaberry*: "I like to sing my song/in the middle of the Malecón/watching the sun go down/in San Pedro de Macorís". Guerra had it about right. Though easily the city's most attractive public space, the Malecón only comes to life at night and,

The Cocolos

When the Dominican sugar industry was nearing its zenith in the late 1800s, plantation owners began to employ migrant labourers from a number of islands in the British Antilles to meet the increased work demand. These black English-speakers – many of whom prefer to be called "The English" – were termed **Cocolos**, a bastardization of Tortola, one of the islands from which the workers arrived. While many of them returned home to their respective islands each year with their harvest season earnings, growing numbers began to settle permanently in camps around San Pedro de Macorís.

The Cocolos lived in squalid **bateyes**, shantytowns that were vermin infested and tended to lack running water. Disease – malaria, cholera and leprosy mainly – was widespread, and residents often starved during the off-season. They were also the victims of widespread **racism**, which led many to embrace the pan-Africanism of **Marcus Garvey**, a Jamaica-born activist who moved to New York's Harlem to spread his message of black empowerment. Thousands joined his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which encouraged community self-reliance and provided disability benefits for those injured in the mills, and donated a portion of their salaries to the Black Star Line, a black-owned and -operated fleet meant to repatriate New World blacks to West Africa one day. In August 1921 the Garveyites organized a strike to protest against the inhuman conditions of the *bateyes*, but the unrest was broken up by US Marines who occupied the Dominican Republic, and the local leaders of the UNIA were deported.

The community infrastructure begun by UNIA soon evolved into **self-improvement organizations** that pooled resources to better the conditions in the *bateyes*, establish and enforce codes of conduct and provide medical care. During nonworking seasons, members formed cricket teams that evolved into the sugar-mill baseball squads, which eventually produced some of the world's finest players. Labour unrest continued as well – in 1946 the Cocolos staged the only successful strike of the Trujillo era – which made sugar companies turn westward to Haiti for cheap migrant labour.

particularly, at weekends when the little green huts lining the seafront suddenly turn into busy bars and foodstalls, the discos crank up their sound systems and vendors weave through the crowds hawking fast food, boiled corn, sweets and Clorets, and the beer and rum flow.

Arrival and orientation

The main highway running east from Santo Domingo arcs its way through San Pedro as Avenida Circunvalación. Though the main guagua station lies on the main road by the Stalinist government offices building close to the baseball stadium, you can alight at any one of the highway's several major intersections with the major arteries into the city centre. Guaguas arrive from and depart for Santo Domingo (RD$90) and La Romana (RD$65), and sometimes on to Higüey, at regular intervals from early morning until around 9pm. Arriving passengers either hike the 1–2km into the city centre (depending where you get off the bus and where you're headed), seek out one of the less obvious *públicos* (RD$20) or risk life and limb on the back of a *motoconcho* (RD$30–50). If driving from Santo Domingo, take the first right when you reach the roundabout after the bridge (it's the one with the iron baseball sculpture at its centre). This will lead you straight down Avenida Charro to the Malecón. Any other option will take you into the city centre and a honking maelstrom of traffic.

Accommodation

Though San Pedro is a fairly large city, there's not much in the way of nice accommodation.

Hotel Macorix Gastón Fernando Deligne, just off the Malecón ☎ 339-2100, Ⓦ www.hotelmacorix.com. This, the grandest hotel in town, is rather faded and overpriced though it's close to the action and its swimming pool area thrums with live merengue at weekends, open to all comers. Since the 170 rooms are of variable quality, check out several and take one on the top two floors to ensure a sea view. ⑥

Hotel Royal Four blocks northeast of Parque Duarte on Calle Ramón Castillo ☎ 529-7105. Much better value than the *Macorix*, this hotel comprises a compact block with smaller en-suite rooms in better condition, offering the standard amenities. ③

The City

A good place to start is the Malecón, which hugs the coastline at the south-western end of the city; a mellow place to stroll in the cooling sea-breeze during weekdays, it transforms into a throbbing party spot at night, especially at weekends, while on Sunday, it's taken over by perambulating families. Head north of the Malecón on Avenida Charro to get a quick glimpse of some of the grand architecture that was built during the first half of the twentieth century. Passing the port authority, you'll notice the nicely renovated 1915 Centro Cultural Fermoselle, Charro at 10 de Septiembre, which hosts occasional concerts, weddings and other assorted events. Three blocks further up the street stands the improbably virginal-looking 1911 Iglesia San Pedro Apóstol, at avenidas Charro and Independencia, whose bright whitewashed facade stands in gleaming contrast to the dilapidated dwellings opposite. From here, head north up Independencia, San Pedro's main shopping street, to Parque Duarte (also Parque Central) whose shady trees provide some welcome greenery amid all the surrounding concrete and traffic chaos. On Mondays traditional Cocolo bands gather there in the morning and play until noon – the only way to hear the great local *momise* music if you're not in town for a festival.

Also worth a look is the palatial mansion of local baseball hero George Bell (called Jorge Bell locally), which lies east of Avenida Independencia, on Avenida 27 de Febrero, one of the city's main shopping drags, two blocks south of Circunvalación. It's certainly one of the city's most ostentatious buildings, a coral-coloured behemoth adorned with castle turrets, a drawbridge and a moat.

Estadio Tetelo Vargas

Above any building, San Pedro is famous for its baseball players. Sammy Sosa is just one of the modern greats who grew up in and around the city, spending his free time playing stickball with a modified milk carton for a glove. The Estadio Tetelo Vargas, on Avenida Circunvalación and Carretera Mella (☎ 246-4077, Ⓦ www.estrellasorientales.com.do), is a tattered concrete temple to the sport. Named after one of the first great Dominican baseballers, it's a good place to catch a game. Check Santo Domingo newspapers and the stadium website for schedules; tickets are available on the night of the game for RD$50–400, but get there early.

Ingenio Porvenir

A few blocks east of the stadium stands the largest of the local sugar mills, Ingenio Porvenir, built by Cuban refugees in 1879. Like the sugar industry itself, its fate has been in limbo as the machinery has lain idle for most of the last ten years. Today, the "Engine of the Future" – as the mill's name translates into

English – may finally fulfill its potential as a Spanish-backed private firm has invested US$1 million, promised to create over two thousand much-needed jobs and was due to start production in 2011.

The outskirts

On the fringe of San Pedro begins *batey* country, where most of the baseball players grew up, in the midst of seemingly endless fields of sugar cane. Five kilometres east of the city the Río Soco flows into the sea, with Playa Soco, an unremarkable local beach, extending either side of the river mouth.

Batey Consuelo

Eleven kilometres north of the town centre, Batey Consuelo is home to hundreds of Haitian cane cutters and a smattering of remaining English (see p.301), and has produced star baseball players such as Rico Carty, George Bell and Julio Franco. The neighbourhood is liveliest during Semana Santa, when a Haitian carnival with parades and traditional *gagá* music played on keyless wooden tubes heralds a bawdy religious ceremony.

Cueva de las Maravillas

Seventeen kilometres beyond San Pedro, just past the unmissable entrance to *Playa Nueva Romana* – the new residential complex and marina on the right-hand side of the highway to La Romana – you'll find prominent national-park signs to the left, marking the entrance to the **Cueva de las Maravillas** (Tues–Sun 9am–5.15pm; RD$300). Translated into English as the Cave of Wonders, the extent of your wonderment will depend on how many stalactites or stalagmites you have seen before. Though only thirty percent of the system of caverns is available for viewing, you nevertheless get to see scores of **Taino pictographs** and beautifully odd geologic formations; the easy walkways (and wheelchair-accessible ramps) with motion-sensor lighting make the caverns easy to explore during the 40min guided tours though they arguably take away some of the mystery. Only a few of the **guides** speak English, but they are well versed in the cave's history and the significance of the various pictographs. You cannot take photographs once inside, although postcards are available at the gift shop. There's also a small, rather sparse café on site. The non profit foundation that runs the cave is growing, offering **horseriding** in the surrounding countryside (RD$ 400 per hour) and a couple of iguana enclosures to gawk at.

You can reach the cave from either San Pedro or La Romana on any of the frequent guaguas (RD$40) that shuttle between the two towns. A taxi there and back will cost around RD$2000, including wait time. Aim to arrive at opening time, or after 2pm, if you want to avoid the tour groups.

Eating and drinking

Apolo It's less atmospheric than nearby *Robby Mar* but you can tuck into decent steaks, fresh seafood and some vegetable chinese dishes. Closed Mon.

Portofino Malecón. A cheap and popular Italian patio restaurant churning out pizzas aplenty at the eastern end, past the roundabout. Closed Mon.

Robby Mar ☎529-4926. You'll find the best food in town at this dependable seafood restaurant just off Av Charro (turn left 100m north of the cathedral, past the basketball court). Given that it's tucked away behind the brightly coloured stalls where fishermen sell the day's catch to city residents, the restaurant has a remarkably romantic ambience, with candlelit outdoor tables that look out over the river. The prices are reasonable and the menu includes a variety of local shrimp, lobster and grilled fish dishes.

Semana Santa

The Haitian *bateyes* that surround La Romana and San Pedro hold exuberant **Semana Santa** festivities during the Christian Holy Week, which is also the most important Voodoo celebration of the year. The various satellite *bateyes* surrounding a sugar mill each have their own religious brotherhoods, headed by a medium known as a *houngan* (male) or a *mambo* (female). Each worships a patron deity and has its own **gagá** band – called *rara* in Haiti – which plays a repertoire of religious and Carnival songs in a processional orchestra of one-note trumpets and bamboo tubes that are blown and beaten in a cacophonous procession that can play all night long. On **Ash Wednesday**, the groups carry their senior officers on their shoulders in chairs, accompanied by *gagá*. This is just a warm-up to **Good Friday** when, just before dawn, four shrouded dancers parade into the *perestil*, where religious services are performed. The *houngan* "breathes life" into them one at a time, and they throw off their shrouds and lead the *gagá* bands in a parade around their *batey*, playing, singing and dancing to songs with lascivious lyrics, in keeping with the festival's theme of regeneration and fertility. On Saturday and **Easter Sunday** they head out onto the road towards the sugar mill. Upon encountering another group along the way, a competitive jam session begins, which can, in cases, lead to fisticuffs. Though anyone is welcome to attend Semana Santa, if you look like you have money the *gagá* bands will repeatedly play for you, seeking money and rum in return; you're best off bringing plenty of small bills for tips to the band, and arriving in a small group.

To familiarize yourself with the music of Semana Santa, you should purchase two things: the Smithsonian Folkways CD *Caribbean Revels: Haitian Rara and Dominican Gagá*, which features live recordings from Semana Santa festivals across the island, and *Rara! Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* by Elizabeth McAlister, a terrific book with companion CD on the music and the culture that surrounds it.

Nightlife

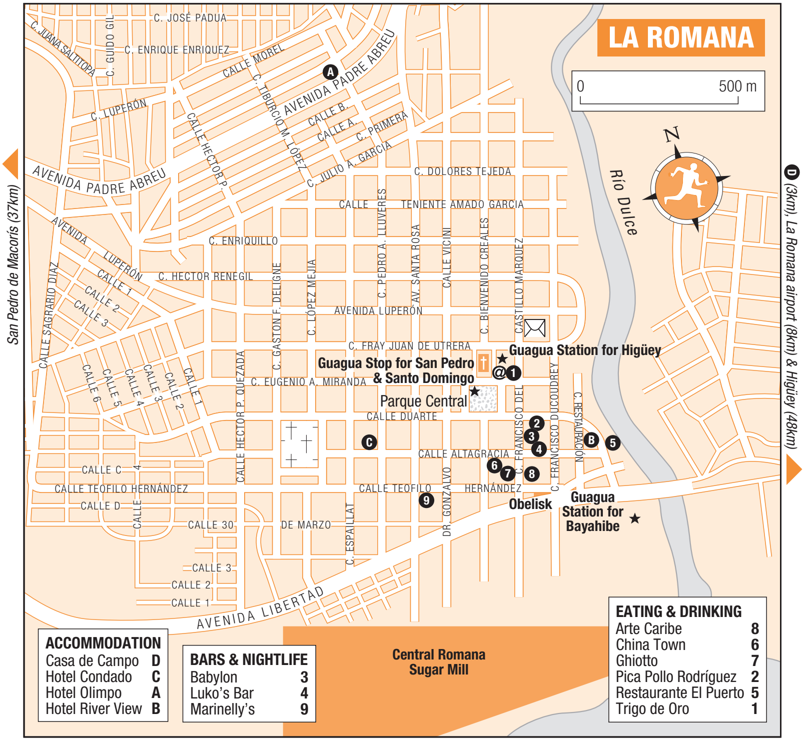
San Pedro's buzzing **nightlife**, the primary reason to visit the town, is also centred on the promenade where over twenty green-coloured bar-cum-food stalls line the front. Most only open for business in the evening and at weekends when the city's discos are also in full effect. Popular venues include *Justin* and *Café Caribe*, both along the Malecón – and there's also a major disco at the *Hotel Macoríx*. The nearby *Kari Mar* bar, also on the Malecón, shows televised baseball and is a good place to start the night with a beer.

La Romana

LA ROMANA, 37km east of San Pedro, is slowly developing into a low-key tourist destination, thanks to its appealing riverside setting, increasing numbers of good restaurants, bars and cafés as well as its proximity to sights such as Isla Catalina (p.105) and the Cueva de las Maravillas (p.101). Since the time the South Porto Rico Sugar Company built the mammoth Central Romana mill in 1917, La Romana has been a one-company town; the mill was the only sugar operation not taken over by Trujillo during his thirty-year reign. If you're here in the harvesting season (Dec–March), you'll hear the train hooting as it arrives from the surrounding plantations, laden with sugar cane. The mill was eventually sold to multinational Gulf & Western in 1967, which used the substantial profits to expand their holdings in the area, constructing the lavish *Casa de Campo* resort just to the east and convincing the government to open the first of the country's industrial free-zones here. The mill and the resort, sold in the 1980s to the wealthy Fanjul family of Cuba, help make this one of the most highly employed parts of the country. Party time for the fiestas patronales occurs in the last week of August.

Arrival and information

Most independent visitors to La Romana arrive in a rental car or guagua en route to more exciting destinations like Santo Domingo or Punta Cana. The majority of the guaguas let you off in the city's **Parque Central**, though those from Bayahibe stop at the town's east entrance on the main highway, on the west side of the bridge that leads to *Casa de Campo*. The main guagua station, with connections west to San Pedro de Macorís and Santo Domingo, lies on the main highway some way from the town centre but frequent *públicos* stop at the park offering free transfers. The transport terminal for Higüey, from where you can catch a guagua to Punta Cana, lies just off the park, with departures every 30–45 minutes (5am–10pm; 1hr 15min; RD$90). Battered minibuses bound for Boca de Yuma (every 35min 7am–7pm; 1hr 30min; RD$90) leave from along Calle Utrera, beyond the market stalls.


LA ROMANA
0
500 m
N
San Pedro de Macorís (37km)
D (3km), La Romana airport (8km) & Higüey (48km)
Río Dulce
C. JOSÉ PADUA
C. JUANA SALTITOPA
C. GUIDO GIL
C. ENRIQUE ENRIQUEZ
CALLE MOREL
AVENIDA PADRE ABREU
C. TIBURCIO M. LÓPEZ
CALLE B.
CALLE A.
C. PRIMERA
C. JULIO A. GARCÍA
C. LUPERÓN
CALLE HECTOR P.
AVENIDA PADRE ABREU
C. DOLORES TEJEDA
CALLE LLUVERES
TENIENTE AMADO GARCÍA
AVENIDA LUPERÓN
C. ENRIQUILLO
C. HECTOR RENEGIL
CALLE 1
CALLE 2
CALLE 3
CALLE SAGRARIO DÍAZ
C. PEDRO A. LLUVERES
AV. SANTA ROSA
CALLE VICINI
C. BIENVENIDO CREALES
CASTILLO MÁRQUEZ
C. GASTÓN F. DELIGNE
C. LÓPEZ MEJÍA
AVENIDA LUPERÓN
C. FRAY JUAN DE UTRERA
Guagua Station for Higüey
Guagua Stop for San Pedro & Santo Domingo
C. EUGENIO A. MIRANDA
CALLE 6
CALLE 5
CALLE 4
CALLE 3
CALLE 2
CALLE 1
Parque Central
CALLE DUARTE
CALLE HECTOR P. QUEZADA
C. FRANCISCO DEL CASTILLO MÁRQUEZ
C. FRANCISCO DUCOUDREY
C. RESTAURACIÓN
CALLE ALTAGRACIA
CALLE C
CALLE 4
CALLE TEOFILO HERNÁNDEZ
CALLE D
CALLE TEOFILO HERNÁNDEZ
DR. GONZALVO
Obelisk
Guagua Station for Bayahibe
CALLE 30 DE MARZO
C. ESPAILLAT
CALLE 3
CALLE 2
CALLE 1
AVENIDA LIBERTAD
Central Romana Sugar Mill
A
B
C
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9

ACCOMMODATION	
Casa de Campo	D
Hotel Condado	C
Hotel Olimpo	A
Hotel River View	B

BARS & NIGHTLIFE	
Babylon	3
Luko's Bar	4
Marinelly's	9

EATING & DRINKING	
Arte Caribe	8
China Town	6
Ghiotto	7
Pica Pollo Rodríguez	2
Restaurante El Puerto	5
Trigo de Oro	1

If you're staying at Casa de Campo or one of the resorts in Bayahibe and arrive at the small La Romana **airport**, your hotel will almost certainly arrange the 40min transfer from here into town.

Nearly everything you might need can be found around Parque Central, including banks and **ATMs**, a **pharmacy** as well as an **internet** café and telephone centre. There is also a monster Jumbo **hypermarket** down on Avenida Libertad.

It's best to avoid **driving** within city limits, as there are a number of unmarked, and even mismarked one-way streets, and traffic accidents are frequent. However, if you do want to hire a car, Avis (ⓣ550-0600) has an office on Castillo Márquez and Duarte, one block from the park. **Taxis** around town can be picked up at the southern end of the Parque Central (fixed prices are advertised), or from the bus shelter across from the obelisk on Avenida Libertad, where *públicos* also leave for *Casa de Campo*. Most taxi rides in town should not cost more than RD$150.

Accommodation

For a bustling prosperous town, **hotels** are in short supply and decent lodgings are even more scarce.

Casa de Campo 4km east of La Romana on H4 ⓣ523-3333, ⓦwww.casadecampo.com.do. The country's top resort, a massive fantasy world of carefree luxury isolated from life outside, frequented by serious glitterati and encompassing almost 30 square kilometres of meticulously manicured rolling hills set along the sea. Features include the choice of 20 restaurants, 15 bars, a marina, plus an entire shopping "village" (see opposite) complete with 5000-seat amphitheatre, church and museum. Guests can choose between all-inclusive or room-only rates, which still include a golf cart to get around and numerous extras. ⑧

Hotel Condado Altagracia 55 ⓣ813-1051.Though rooms are small and dark with tiny bathrooms, they are spotless with firm beds, cold water, a/c and cable TV. A couple of the quieter rooms at the back have windows. ②

Hotel Olimpo At the corner of Abreu and Llúberes ⓣ550-7646. This functional but gloomy business hotel is inconveniently situated away from the town centre but has well-maintained modern facilities. Continental breakfast included. ③

Hotel River View Restauración 17 ⓣ550-9415, ⓔhotelriverview@gmail.com. Enjoying the best location in town (though not the eponymous view), this place has great potential but is in need of some TLC and better management. That said, rooms are fairly comfortable – though with slightly tired furnishings, a/c, hot water & cable TV. As it's not far from a major highway, some rooms can be noisy. ③

The town

The town itself is not especially interesting but its tidy streets lined with potted palms combined with a sprinkling of cosy cafés and excellent restaurants, plus its riverside location, make La Romana a pleasant place to hang out. The delightfully shaded **Parque Central** is the major meeting place, dotted with an eclectic mix of metal sculptures and fibre glass statues of former local baseball heroes. You can check out the current crop of players during the winter fixtures in the **Estadio Francisco Micheli** (ⓣ556-6188, ⓦwww.lostorosdeleste.com; tickets RD$50–400), located at Abreu and Luperón at the city's western end, home field of Los Toros del Este. Check the website or newspapers for details of matches. Just west of the arena the **municipal market** sells bountiful produce and meat; look also for the small *botánicas* selling various items related to *Vodú Dominicana*.

If you're desperate for a dip in the sea, continue 10km west to reach Playa Cumayasa, a decent public beach beyond town – the turnoff is marked "Boca Cumayasa" – though not on a par with the glorious swathes of sand much further east near Bayahibe or Punta Cana. Back in the other direction, 18km east of La Romana along the road to Higüey, is Batey La Seja, a welcoming place to enjoy Semana Santa celebrations, largely because the local residents have been thoroughly recorded by anthropologists and are used to outside visitors. To get there turn right onto the unmarked dirt road exactly 1km after the town of Benerito on the road to Higüey.

Activities around La Romana

Along the nearby rivers Soca and Chavón, you'll be able to take a variety of extremely popular jeep and river tours. These are available at all of the all-inclusive hotels from Juan Dolio to Punta Cana and various tour operators in Bayahibe (see p.107), generally involving a drive into the countryside, stopping off at a farm or *batey* – perhaps with an hour or two on a horse or ATV – before gliding downriver on a raft-like boat, dancing to merengue and downing copious rum punches.

An array of activities is available at the nearby luxury resort of *Casa de Campo* (see opposite page) even to non-residents, though at a price. Accessing the tiny snorkelling haven of Isla Catalina, however, can be organized from La Romana itself, and at a more affordable rate.

Casa de Campo and Altos de Chavón

By far the greatest variety of activities can be found in the *Casa de Campo* resort, which offers day-passes to non guests (US$25, food purchased separately) that grant you access to the extensive luxury playground, including **Playa Minitas**, a delightful stretch of sand protected by a shallow reef. You can also sign up for the resort's plethora of excursions and activities (see p.112) and visit **Altos de Chavón**, a high-concept shopping mall perched atop a cliff looking out over the Río Chavón, to the east of the resort. Formerly free for non-residents to wander round, you can now only visit on a day-pass (but you'll also need to factor in US$15 taxi ride from the gate, and US$10 return) or as part of a tour. Another Gulf & Western brainchild, it is a mock Tuscan medieval hilltop town that exudes dreary kitsch. That's not to say that the place is totally devoid of merit: the 5000-seat open-air amphitheatre is impressive (and plays host to big-name concerts by the likes of Sting and Alicia Keys) and the small **archeology museum** (daily 8am–10pm; free; ☎682-3111) is excellent, boasting a collection of three thousand Taino artefacts, including two intact canoes and a wooden *cahoba* idol culled from Parque Nacional del Este. There are several good restaurants on the grounds as well. The most idyllic time to visit the place is just before dusk, when the hordes have departed and the sunset spreads over the western hills.

With its own **marina**, it should come as no surprise that *Casa de Campo* offers an abundance of **watersports** – practically everything from kayaking and windsurfing to scuba diving and serious deep-sea **sportsfishing** (expect to catch wahoo, dorado, kingfish, sailfish, marlin and barracuda) is on offer.

Back on dry land, the resort also boasts one of the world's top **golf courses** – the Pete Dye Teeth of the Dog, a stunning links course (18 holes roughly US$300 for non guests) - as well as several lesser, cheaper courses, a range of activities on horseback, a **tennis** centre and a world-class shooting range. Everything should be booked directly through the hotel (Ⓦwww.casadecampo.com.do; ☎523-3333).

Isla Catalina

Two kilometres off shore lies the small picture-postcard, palm-fringed **Isla Catalina**. The island does, though, have the southern coast's best **coral reef**, and the fish have grown tame enough that schools of them swim up and eat food literally out of your hands. This makes it one of the island's prime spots for **scuba diving** as well; various dive shops (see p.112) lead trips to a steep underwater dropoff called “The Wall”, which holds an enviably intact coral reef that provides habitat for a virtual aquarium. La Marina Turística (ⓣ550-8156 ⓦwww.nauticterminalromana.com; US$45) has an office in *Restaurante El Puerto* in La Romana and leads scuba-diving excursions for certified PADI divers (US$120 for two tanks).

The island is reachable by shuttle boats, where *Casa de Campo* has set up a small dock, a few pavilions and a shaded restaurant/bar. Several local tours and cruise ships drop anchor just off the island and ferry thousands of passengers back and forth via speedboats, so expect large crowds. You can book **day-trips** there independently through two operators in La Romana: La Marina Turística and El Fiestón (ⓣ417-0630; US$55), which is located on the river beside the bridge. Both offer a motorized catamaran snorkelling trip out to the island including lunch, drinks and snorkel gear.

There is also a virgin beach not far from the main dock where you can camp for the night; to do so, you’ll need to get a permit from the national park office for Parque Nacional del Este (free; see p.111) in Bayahibe’s main parking lot.

Eating and drinking

Increasing numbers of tourists from *Casa de Campo*, visiting cruise ships and the occasional tour bus help support a surprisingly diverse culinary scene, from candlelit riverside dining to excellent Dominican fast food and delightful café-bars.

Arte Caribe Francisco del Castillo Márquez and Altagracia. A casual café-bar set in an attractive plant-filled patio provides an agreeable spot for a drink or light bite. Burgers and sandwiches are available for under RD$200 and the crispy empanadas (RD$40) are a treat.

China Town Altagracia. It may be an antiseptic, neon-lit environment but you can’t argue with the quality or the prices. Excellent soups, chow mein and chop suey dishes – most for around RD$150 – plus some fancier fare, such as chilli filet mignon and breaded chicken in sesame-seed sauce for a little more.

Ghiotto Francisco del Castillo Márquez 20 ⓣ556-8366. A delightful candelit courtyard, open in the evening, provides the perfect backdrop for some innovative Italian cuisine using home-made pasta. Try the fried ravioli stuffed with cheese, lemon and honey (RD$135) followed by black tagliolini with shrimp (RD$ 440). There are also great pizzas (from RD$290) cooked in a traditional wood-fired oven.

Pica Pollo Rodríguez Duarte 2 A. This popular spot is packed to the gills at lunchtime with Dominicans tucking into tasty inexpensive *comida criolla*, each portion between RD$30–60. Excellent fresh juices are served at the kiosk outside.

Restaurante El Puerto Monción 11 ⓣ550-8156. Perched above the river, this open-sided restaurant offers fabulous views across the floodlit river. The cuisine too is good, an eclectic mix of international and Dominican favourites such as paella and grilled sea bass plus some renowned Thai dishes. Mains around RD$500. Lunch available by reservation.

Trigo de Oro Eugenio A. Miranda 9. An excellent, moderately priced *panadería and repostería* serving authentic to-die-for French pastries, croissant or baguette sandwiches and salads. Set in a converted mansion and covered patio forecourt decked out with plants, it’s an ideal place to enjoy a hot chocolate and brioche for breakfast, or a leisurely cocktail in the evening. Free wi-fi. Daily 7am–9pm, Sun 7am–1pm.

Nightlife

More a place to indulge in a relaxing evening’s dining than have a wild party, La Romana nevertheless has a couple of spots where you can swing your hips.

Babylon Francisco del Castillo Márquez, just down from the park. Set to open at the time of writing, this chic glass-fronted club promises to be the slickest operation in town. Closed Mon–Wed.

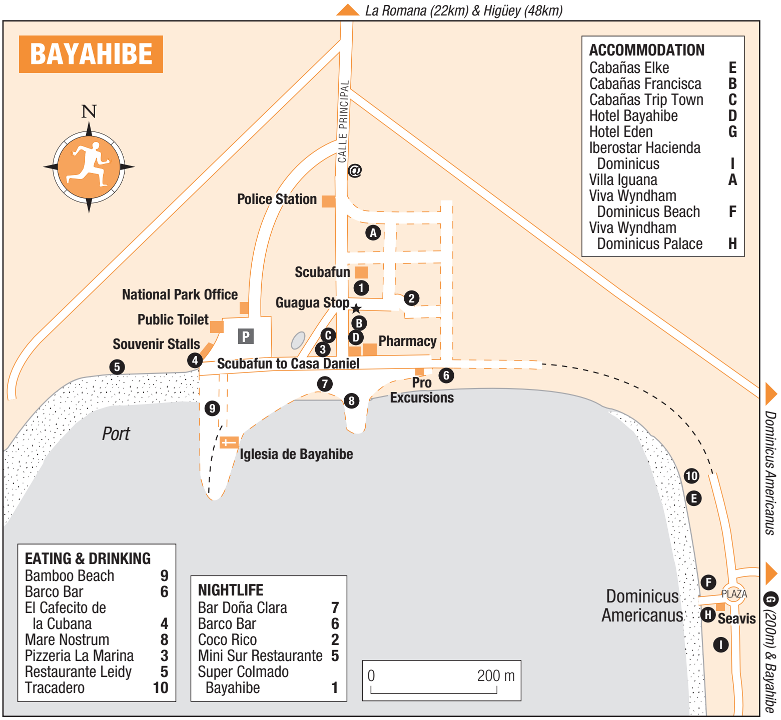
Luko’s Bar Altagracia. A smaller, darker, enclosed disco-bar venue with karaoke on Wednesdays. Closed Sun–Tues.

Marinelly's Teófilo Hernández and Av Santa Rosa. A long-established bar-club that draws a varied, smartly dressed clientele. It has a pleasant, open thatched area plus a more flashy bar and dance space inside, where a DJ or band takes centre stage on Fri and Sat nights. The place also serves food and is open until 3am at weekends.

Bayahibe

BAYAHIBE is feeling the pressure. Formerly a pleasant, low-key seaside fishing village, its idyllic setting round a sheltered bay and proximity to the **Parque Nacional del Este**, which offers the country's best **diving** and **snorkelling**, have helped to turn it into a significant tourist destination in recent years. Where once a handful of fishing boats bobbed in the water, serried ranks of motorized launches and catamarans waiting to transfer tourists to Isla Saona pack the harbour.

Despite ambitious construction on all sides, from the all-inclusive resorts along the surrounding coast – in particular the resort zone of **Dominicus Americanus** to the east – to the work of the burgeoning Italian expat community on the village's fringes, which includes a new residential project that is likely to alter the complexion of the place, Bayahibe retains its appeal and laidback vibe. There is a good selection of budget accommodation, as well as a row of atmospheric restaurants dotting the **waterfront** and miles of beach stretching out on either side of the village although Bayahibe's own strip of sand is rather scrubby and uninviting. Moreover, this is the best base from which to explore the beaches, caves and dive sites of Parque Nacional del Este (see p.111).


La Romana (22km) & Higüey (48km)
BAYAHIBE
N
CALLE PRINCIPAL
@
Police Station
Scubafun
National Park Office
Guagua Stop
Public Toilet
P
Souvenir Stalls
Pharmacy
Scubafun to Casa Daniel
Pro Excursions
Port
Iglesia de Bayahibe
Dominicus Americanus
PLAZA
Seavis
Dominicus Americanus
G (200m) & Bayahibe
0 200 m
ACCOMMODATION
Cabañas Elke E
Cabañas Francisca B
Cabañas Trip Town C
Hotel Bayahibe D
Hotel Eden G
Iberostar Hacienda Dominicus I
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Tracadero 10
NIGHTLIFE
Bar Doña Clara 7
Barco Bar 6
Coco Rico 2
Mini Sur Restaurante 5
Super Colmado Bayahibe 1

Arrival and information

The easiest way to reach Bayahibe by **public transport** is from La Romana by guagua (25 min; RD$50), which stop frequently throughout the day in the centre of the village. From Higüey or points east, you'll have to disembark at the turn off to Bayahibe and catch one of the shuttles from La Romana. Conversely, if you're heading east from the village, get off the La Romana minibus at the main junction and wait at the petrol station to flag down the relevant eastbound transport. **Driving** to Bayahibe is also easy as the turn off from H4, east of La Romana, is well signposted and paved. As you near Bayahibe, the road forks: left takes you to the resort area, while right leads you to the village. **Taxis** between the two areas cost US$10 per trip.

In the central plaza at Dominicus there's a **tourist information** booth stuffed with fliers from various tour operators, while in Bayahibe itself you're probably best off enquiring at the two dive shops.

Accommodation

Local developers hope that the mass construction of the past several years will soon turn the Bayahibe area into a resort district to rival Punta Cana, although it's some way off yet. Aside from a number of large all-inclusives, you'll find a couple of decent budget hotels located in the village as well as a few sets of motel-like "cabañas" aimed primarily at Dominicans on a modest budget and hotel staff from other parts of the country.

The village

Cabañas Francisca Principal ⓣ(829) 968-5877. A short hop from the waterfront, these simple cabins are clean, neat, and equipped with the basics. Rooms are smallish, but come with TVs, fans (a/c available) and fridges, with a tiny outside patio. Cold water only. ②

Cabañas Trip Town Malecón and Prinicipal, no phone. Cabañas both sides of the road. Similar to *Cabañas Francisca*: clean and tidy, simple pine-furnished rooms, with private solar-powered warm-water bathrooms and fans (a/c extra) plus a small space to sit outside. ②

Hotel Bayahibe Principal ⓣ833-0159, ⓔhotelbayahibe@hotmail.com. This bright modern hotel is one of the town's more salubrious offerings. Choose one of the lighter rooms on the upper floor. All rooms are cheerily furnished and air conditioned with comfortable beds, fridges, cable TV and various trimmings. Prices include breakfast. ④

Villa Iguana Ocho ⓣ833-0203, ⓦwww.villaiguana.de. A German-owned guesthouse in the centre of the village, offering five spotless, well-maintained rooms (some with a/c) and three comfortable self-catering apartments (US$59) with kitchenettes (two with balconies), plus a stunning penthouse that covers an entire floor and boasts its own sundeck and mini-pool (for only US$120 a night). Breakfast is included for guests in the rooms and penthouse. A swimming pool is planned for 2011. ④

Dominicus

Cabañas Elke Vía Eladia 7 ⓣ689-8249, ⓦwww.viwi.it. This set of Italian-owned, fan-ventilated rooms and duplex apartments is the nearest you'll get to a budget option in Dominicus, though it looks a bit lost amid the more massive hotels. A small pool and bar-restaurant are on site, though with no beach access (the public beach is a short walk away) most guests take up the reduced day-pass offer (US$77), giving access to facilities at the *Viva Wyndham Dominicus*. Accommodation only or all-inclusive packages are available. Rooms and apartments ⑥

Hotel Eden Av La Laguna 10 ⓣ833 0856, ⓦwww.santodomingovacanze.com. On the approach road into Dominicus (so not on the beach), this family-oriented hotel is a good choice for those looking to avoid the all-inclusives but still wanting an appreciable level of comfort. A selection of well-appointed rooms, apartments and bungalows are available set in pleasant grounds, where there's a decent restaurant, swimming pool, bar and games area, which includes pool and table-tennis tables. Rates include breakfast. ⑤

Iberostar Hacienda Dominicus Playa Dominicus ⓣ688-3600, ⓦwww.iberostar.com. An excellent thirty-acre all-inclusive in the lavish Iberostar tradition, with a great beach with kiosk bars, three separate swimming pools, a shopping mall and 498 large, comfortable rooms with balconies (including some with wheelchair access). The food in the six restaurants is better than in many resorts and there are plenty of watersports on offer – including free equipment for kayaking, snorkelling and windsurfing – as well as a dive centre. ⑧

Viva Wyndham Dominicus Beach Playa Dominicus ⓣ686-5658, ⓦwww.vivaresorts.com. The larger, more family-orientated of the area's two *Viva Wyndham*s, this was Bayahibe's first resort. Its 500 rooms are surrounded by lavish grounds and served by four restaurants, three pools and a dive centre. Guests can indulge in a huge range of activities, including tennis, surfing and even archery. You can choose between standard hotel rooms and more private bungalows. ⑧

Viva Wyndham Dominicus Palace Playa Dominicus ⓣ686-5658, ⓦwww.vivaresorts.com. Just across the plaza, the *Dominicus Palace* markets itself as the more exclusive, refined sibling; however, with over 300 rooms it's hardly boutique. It boasts a full-service spa and tour desk, although facilities are shared across both resorts. ⑧

The town and the beaches

Bayahibe proper consists of little more than a few dozen dwellings, a row of arts and craft stalls, a handful of dive outfits, tour operators and a line of waterfront restaurants, though developments are now taking place on the fringes. Most of the action has moved a bit east along the coast to the **Dominicus Americanus** area with its strip of all-inclusive hotels, souvenir shops and cafeteria-style restaurants on the beach at the border of Parque Nacional del Este. At Dominicus you'll find the area's only **bank** and **ATM** (though the larger resorts have their own ATMs) as well as **car rental** offices, located in the plaza in front of the *Viva Wyndham Dominicus Beach*.

The tourist zone is not exactly unpleasant, but it is rather generic and hardly an inspiring place to hang out. Though your hotel may be here, you'll find a lot more character at the beachfront bars and restaurants within Bayahibe itself. In Bayahibe, separating the beach from the waterfront, a rocky promontory hosts the village's tiny painted wooden church, primary school and a rather neglected interpretive walk outlining the village's history. To the east lies a row of restaurants and tour operators after which the road dissolves into a sandy (or muddy after heavy rain) path that cuts through some scrubland, eventually emerging in Dominicus. To the west of the rocky outcrop is the small beach and harbour, where boats can be hired for trips to the national park (see p.111).

Eating and drinking

Bayahibe offers a good variety of dining as restaurateurs have been forced to up their game in the hope of luring some of the resort trade away from the all-you-can-eat buffets. **Seafood** unsurprisingly dominates the menus, although the blossoming Italian expat community ensures that pasta and pizzas abound. Sadly there's no decent *comedor* in the village.

Bamboo Beach Between the Malecón and Playa Bayahibe. French-owned (and largely French patronized), this place does a decent *camarones al ajillo* (shrimps in garlic) and offers crepes for dessert alongside some Breton specialities that may not be on the menu, so ask.

Barco Bar Malecón. One of the few places you can actually get breakfast and a top choice by the lapping water, offering fresh juices, crepes, sandwiches and cappuccinos from RD$100–200 with a mix of more substantial Dominican and Italian staples for lunch and dinner.

El Cafecito de la Cubana Playa Bayahibe. A fabulously friendly but intimate restaurant under a shady tree just off the beach, serving tasty and excellent-value dishes from a menu ranging from sandwiches and burgers, through fajitas to more traditional *ropa vieja*. Also boasts authentic mojitos made with Havana rum. Closed Tues.

Mare Nostrum Malecón ⓣ833-0055. A great location on a first-floor balcony offering incomparable views across the bay and elegant fine dining by candlelight. However, the pricey seafood-dominated menu, which includes curried shrimps and vodka linguini with salmon, doesn't always live up to its reputation (mains from around RD$350). Closed Mon.

Pizzeria La Marina Malecón. The choice for the Italian expats offers mid-sized thin-crust pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven for RD$300–350.

Restaurante Leidy Playa Bayahibe. Pretty painted tables sitting on the sand provide the perfect setting for sampling the day's catch smothered in a coconut sauce for around RD$300. Closed Wed & sometimes Mon evening.

Tracadero Los Corales, Dominicus Ⓣ906–3664, Ⓦwww.tracadero.it. The most exclusive restaurant in the area and a place for a special occasion, offering refined dining by torchlight and excellent service right by the ocean. Reserve one of the special tables almost out on the rocks. The Italian cuisine and service are excellent though the menu is not particularly imaginative.

Nightlife

The town's nightlife is hardly wild but it does at least make a change from the stale Vegas-light atmosphere at the resorts, which creeps ever closer with the opening of a vast new casino with disco attached on Dominicus Avenue (daily 9pm–4am).

Bar Doña Clara Malecón. Belonging to *Hotel Bayahibe*, this relatively new watering-hole offers surprisingly inexpensive beer right on the waterfront. Order some *pasteles en hoja* (plantain stuffed with ground beef, boiled in plantain leaves) while you're here.

Barco Bar Malecón. The comfy wicker chairs on a raised thatched deck provide the perfect spot at this waterside location to enjoy a sundowner from an extensive bar menu. With occasional dancing.

Mini Sur Restaurante Leidy. Now only on Friday nights, when the tables are pushed back, the DJ sets up shop, and the floor space is cleared for all to wiggle their hips to merengue, salsa and bachata – popular with locals, expats and tourists.

La Aleta

On a 1988 expedition deep in the heart of Parque Nacional del Este, a team of archeologists from Indiana University discovered the most significant and extensive Taino excavation yet on record, four ceremonial plazas surrounding a *cenote*; (a natural well) – a site referred to as **La Aleta**. Evidence shows that natives came to this well to worship during pre-Columbian times from across the countryside, even as far away as the Tetero valley near Pico Duarte.

In his *History of the Indies*, Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas recorded a journey to La Aleta in the late fifteenth century, noting that the natives lowered bowls into the well via a piece of rattan rope to pull up water, which was sweet at the surface and salty at the bottom – a stratification that still exists. He also described the slaughter of seven hundred people at La Aleta in 1503, the culmination of Nicolás de Ovando's campaign of Taino extermination, which he started after the Tainos killed three Spaniards on Isla Saona, itself a retaliation for an attack by a Spanish soldier. Bones from the mass killing have been found scattered throughout the site and within the well.

For the Tainos, caves served as the gateways to an underground spirit world. The well was apparently a site for subterranean ceremonies; fragments believed to have been parts of rafts lowered into the well have also been discovered. Other artefacts recovered from the site include clay pots and one straw basket, thought to contain offerings of food; a cassava cooking pan; axes and clubs; and an intact wooden *duho* (the seat from which the *caciques* prophesied to their people). In addition to the *cenote*, there is a series of four ceremonial plazas at the site – bounded by monumental limestone pillars – where a ball game similar to modern-day soccer was played by those who attended the rituals.

The government hopes one day to blaze a trail here from Peñon Gordo and open La Aleta to the public, but for now archeologists have to use a helicopter to get in, and no one else is supposedly allowed admittance. Still, the place has been ransacked twice by treasure hunters, and Dominican soldiers have been posted to prevent further looting.

Coco Rico Local box-like nightclub venue in the village centre, which doesn't get going until late. Closed Tues.

Super Colmado Bayahibe From sunset, the music blares and the drink flows as the general store transforms into a full-time bar for locals and expats alike, spilling out onto the street. It's certainly the cheapest place to get an ice-cold Presidente. Daily 7.30am–noon, 3–9 or 10pm.

Parque Nacional del Este

Bayahibe sits on the northwest edge of expansive **PARQUE NACIONAL DEL ESTE**, a peninsula jutting south into the Caribbean and also encompassing Isla Saona, just across a small bay and easily accessible by boat. The national park features a maze of forests, mangroves, trails, caves and cliffs, an impressive array of **birdlife** and, on the cultural side, some signs of early Taino activity. Not much of the park, however, is conveniently accessible; in fact, no roads lead directly into its interior, and the best method of approach is to **hire boats** from Bayahibe to hit specific points along the rim, from where you can hike inland. Wherever you go in the park, wear plenty of insect repellent against the ubiquitous mosquitoes and a sizeable population of wasps. Watch out, too, for **tarantulas**, though they won't bother you unless they're antagonized.

The most popular part of the park – and rightfully so – is **Isla Saona**, an island off the southern coast lined with alternating stretches of idyllic, coconut tree-backed beachfront and mangrove swamp, unpopulated except for one fishing hamlet of around three hundred families. That said, the tourist traffic on Saona has increased exponentially in recent years and it has begun to feel more like high season at Miami's South Beach in parts, prompting the more discerning operators to look for alternative spots, such as Isla Catalinita.

Isla Saona and around

Most boats pull in to Isla Saona at the tiny village of Mano Juan, a picturesque strip of pastel wooden huts with a 4km hiking trail that leads inland, an expensive restaurant run by *Viva Wyndham Dominicus Beach* and a long line of beach chairs and umbrellas; or Piscina Natural (known locally as Laguna Canto de la Playa), a sand bar with a clear lagoon behind it that makes a good snorkelling spot (you'll see lots of giant starfish trundling along the sea bed, but resist the urge to pick them up). If you visit with an independent boat, avoid the hordes and head to one of the more isolated stretches of beach that dot the entire island, such as Canto de la Playa, where you're more likely to get the white sand and transparent water to yourself, though in high season that's not guaranteed even here. Another option is to have your boat captain skip Saona altogether, head into the Catuano Canal that separates Saona from the mainland, and stop off at the small island of Catalinita (not to be confused with Isla Catalina, see p.105), which gets less tourist traffic and has some excellent reefs for diving (less so for snorkelling). Its beaches are littered with large conch shells and during the winter months you may be able to spot humpback whales and dolphins and even, if you're really lucky, an elusive manatee.

Cueva del Puente and Peñon Gordo

The park's limestone landscape is riddled with caves, many of which bear evidence of ceremonial use by the Tainos and are adorned with Taino rock art. At the present time, the only cave system that is relatively straightforward to visit is the

Cueva del Puente, which lies around 3km south of the national park entrance. You'll need to hire a guide at the entrance who will accompany you on the fairly easy 30min hike down to the caves (see below). The system consists of three separate levels of caverns (the first has been caved in and thus gets some sunlight) with thousands of stalagmites and stalactites along with hundreds of bats and sparkling seams of bright, crystallized minerals. There are also Taino pictographs on the third level, though they're not accessible to tourists: if your park ranger knows their stuff, though, they'll be able to show you a Taino picture of a small-eared owl on the first level of caves – a bird that was thought by the Tainos to ferry dead souls to the afterlife.

The easiest way to reach the next set of caves, **Peñon Gordo**, on the park's west coast, is to hire a boat (2hr each way). There's a nice isolated beach from where it's a 2km walk inland to the **cave**, where you'll find scattered Taino glyphs on its second level. Be sure to bring a torch and boots if you want to get the most out of your visit. Also watch your step at the entrance, which is basically a large, slippery hole in the ground.

Cuevas Padre Nuestro

The **Cuevas Padre Nuestro** form a remote cave system with four perfectly clear, deep, fresh springs that have been a source of potable water since pre-Columbian times. Today local kids swim in – and local tour operators lead cave-diving tours to – Cueva Chico, the cave with the easiest access. Archeologists also regularly scour the depths on the hunt for Taino relics – they have previously unearthed a *poliza*, a ceremonial Taino vessel. If not part of an

Tour operators in Bayahibe

Though most of the resort hotels in Bayahibe and Punta Cana–Bavaró have their own **tour operators**, which offer excursions to the park, they usually contract out to the operators in Bayahibe; so to reduce costs, you should book directly (or over the internet) with them.

Casa Daniel On the seafront in Bayahibe ⓣ833-0050, ⓦwww.casa-daniel.com. A recommended diving operator, which offers similar packages to Scubafun, though they're generally slightly more expensive, as well as Nitrox dives.

ProExcursions On the waterfront in the village ⓣ829/659-4688, ⓦwww.proexcursionsbayahibe.com. This French-Canadian outfit offers similar excursions to Seavis, though they're a little pricier (Saona US$89, Saona and Catalina US$99). You pay a US$15 supplement if you want lobster with your lunch. An adventure safari involving kayaking, quad-biking and horse-riding will set you back US$129. Internet bookings preferred.

Scubafun Príncipe 28 ⓣ833-0003, ⓦwww.scubafun.info. A good choice for divers, with scuba programmes including PADI certification (US$365) and dives to local coral reefs (US$135 for a half-day), plus advanced adventure dives into the Puedro Nuestro caves (US$80 for two tanks) and night dives (US$69). Equipment rental costs another US$10 per day.

Seavis In front of the *Viva Wyndham Dominicus Palace* ⓣ714-4947, ⓦwww.seavisbayahibe.com. Offers boat excursions to the island (US$80, including lobster lunch), as well a two-island tour, which also takes in the less-visited Isla Catalinita (US$95), where you've a better chance of getting the remote sands mostly to yourself. Another popular day-trip involves a rural jeep safari (US$75), packing in a sugar plantation, tobacco farm, market and a ranch (plus a short horseride) before lunch, followed by a leisurely cruise, liberally laced with rum punch, down the Río Chavón.

organized tour, you're best off hiring a *motoconcho* to get there, as the muddy dirt road leading to it is impassable by car. Along the road to Bayahibe, turn east onto an unmarked dirt path for 15km to the village of Padre Nuestro, where you will need to hire a local guide (RD$200).

Practicalities

The majority of **boat tours** into the park take off from the car park at Bayahibe's main pier and are best booked in advance. Also located in the car park, the **national park station** (daily 8am–4pm; ☎833-0022) is little more than a small green booth but a necessary stop if you're heading into the national park solo (outfitters should take care of your permits if on a tour) as you'll need to pay a RD$100 entry fee. This is also where you can request a camping permit for Isla Catalina (see p.105).

Dozens of tour companies (see opposite) set off from here for Isla Saona. Alternatively, you can hire a **private boat** – which will take you to one of the park's best beaches – either at the Bayahibe car park or at one of the overpriced restaurants that line the waterfront. You will probably have to haggle for a good price; the going rate for Saona is around RD$5000 for a boat carrying six to eight passengers, or RD$1500 per person with a minimum of two. The advantage of a private charter is that you can organize to be taken to a more remote, and therefore quieter, beach. If you're on your own and **hiking** into the park, you'll first have to get the RD$100 entrance ticket at the park station and then drive to the far southern end of the resort strip. From there, walk another kilometre along the beach until you arrive at the entrance to the park. There you'll be required to hire one of the park rangers as a guide – which will cost another RD$300–600, depending on the hike.

Camping is sometimes permitted at certain sites in the park though it appears to be at the whim of the park office whether the permit (free) is granted. If successful, you will need to be self-sufficient as the only place to **eat** is at Mano Juan on Isla Saona.

Boca de Yuma and inland

On the northeastern tip of Parque Nacional del Este sits **Boca de Yuma**, a pueblo that has been passed over by mass tourism because of its lack of accessible beachfront, though there is one fairly nice stretch of sand across the river. Boca de Yuma's setting along squat, ocean-pounded bluffs is undeniably impressive and it makes a pleasant stop for independent travellers seeking to experience everyday life in one of the DR's quieter corners. There's also great fishing in the area, and the town makes a good alternate entry point to many of the sights within **Parque Nacional del Este**. From here you can also take in the former stronghold of conquistador **Ponce de León**.

The village and around

Within the village it's possible to wander along the shore, its rocks sculpted over time by the crashing surf, or pay a local fisherman RD$1200 to ferry you across the Río Yuma (and collect you later) to a pretty little beach called **Playa Borinquen** that you'll share only with a couple of grazing cows. Most of the little boats lining the beaches are still used primarily for fishing; this is one of the best fishing grounds for marlin in the entire Caribbean. Renting a boat and captain for the day will cost around RD$5000, more if you want to head for Isla Saona.

A short walk west of town along the waterfront is the national park station at the eastern entrance to **Parque Nacional del Este** (RD$100), from where you can hire horses (RD$1000 per person) or walk for an hour along the water to a natural land bridge from which turbulent jets of sea water rocket into the air. Just a short walk north of the park station, the cavernous **Cueva de Berna**, a large cave once inhabited by Tainos, makes for an alternate, if less spectacular, goal than the caves near Bayahibe. Along with hundreds of bats and small birds, you'll see Taino *caritas* (little faces) carved on the walls, though some have been defaced by graffiti.

A kilometre further inland from Cueva de Berna is another major Taino cave site, **El Manantial del Guano**, which includes three large underground lakes and a stone circle below a small hole in the cave roof, with dozens of petroglyphs representing Taino mythology, including the creation of humanity through the fertilization of the moon by the sun. Some anthropologists believe this may have been a Taino astronomical observatory, as the light through the chink in the ceiling hits a different petroglyph for every cycle of the moon. You can only visit the site with a **guide** (around RD$800) from the park station at Cueva de Berna.

Arrival

Buses headed for Boca de Yuma leave La Romana (every 35min, 7am–7pm; 50min; RD$90) from the **guagua** station northwest of the park, and from Avenida Trejol in Higüey (every 30min, 7am–6pm; 1hr; RD$50). If there are no passengers headed as far as La Boca (most get off in San Rafael) then you'll need to catch one of the tatty minibuses that shuttle between the two places for the return trip. They pass every 15 to 20 minutes from between roughly 7am and 5pm. From San Rafael you can catch a guagua on to Higüey or La Romana (last bus back at 6pm).

Accommodation

Casa Señor Moreno On the bluff. Mr Moreno occasionally rents out a couple of rooms in his fabulous house on the clifftop that boasts spectacular views across the bay, and is ten minutes' walk back out of town. Enquire at *Restaurante Biembo* (see below). ②

El Manantial No phone. For those on a very tight budget who are desperate to stay the night, a couple of blocks back from the waterfront, this hotel has a handful of exceedingly rudimentary but fairly clean rooms, though some may be rented out by the hour. ①

El Viejo Pirata Waterfront Ⓣ804-3151, Ⓔhotelelviejopirata@hotmailcom. Boca de Yuma's main hotel is fronted by a plastic pirate effigy and the obligatory skull and crossbones, and the theme continues across a handful of comfortably furnished rooms. The place also has a small pool, a large tiled terrace overlooking the sea and a decent seafood restaurant. ③

Eating and drinking

Restaurante Arponero The most upmarket of the restaurants along the water is this Italian seafood, pasta and pizza place, affording great views of the bay and also offers boat trips.

Restaurante Biembo On the waterfront. One of several informal restaurants which serve up catch of the day with *tostones* for as little as RD$150.

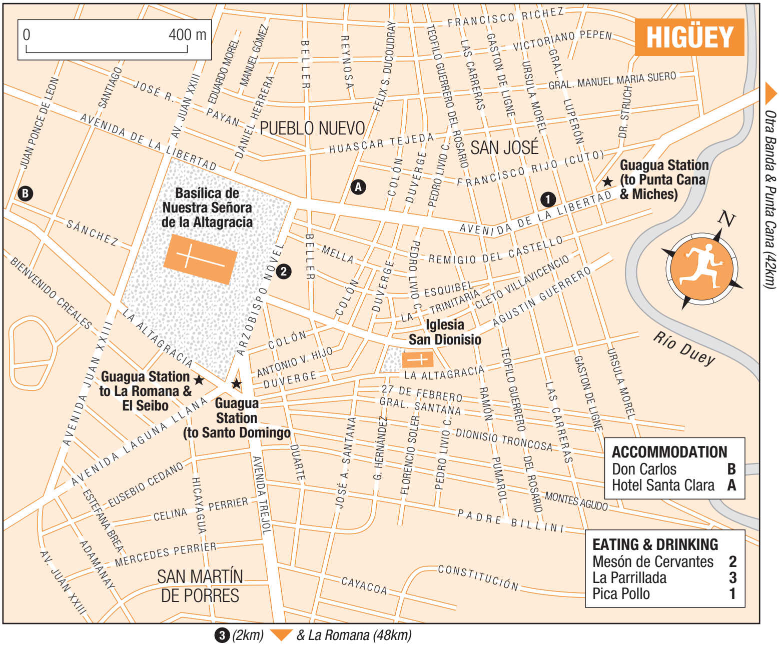
Casa Ponce de León

Approximately 9km northwest of town, in pueblo San Rafael de Yuma, sits the fortified Casa Ponce de León (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm; RD$100), a remote medieval keep built by Taino slaves for the noted explorer, who established a working farm and sugar plantation here during his rule of nearby Higüey at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In 1508 he increased his holdings by setting up a slave-catching outpost in Puerto Rico, which quickly grew into a colony in its own right, proving more profitable than his Dominican estate. Following this venture he set off to Florida, where he died at the hands of natives while searching for the Fountain of Youth.

The parks department has renovated, and now maintains, the two-storey residence, which is now a museum to the life and times of de León; inside you'll find original mahogany furnishings and the restored mahogany floor, along with de León's suit of armour and bulky treasure-chest. The **caretaker** takes visitors on a guided tour in Spanish (for which he expects an RD$100 tip), dispensing a lot of information about both the construction of the house – note the massive stone walls – and de León's exploits, although be aware that if you arrive between midday and 2pm he may well be out to lunch.

Higüey

Cramped, dusty and one hundred percent concrete, **HIGÜEY** is a busy agro-commercial town of 150,000 that's generally passed through quickly on your way to the eastern coast. Despite the uninviting setting, it's famous throughout the country as a Dominican holy city, and tens of thousands gather here each January 21 for a mammoth procession and prayer of intercession to the nation's patron saint, the Virgin of Altagracia, who supposedly provides miraculous healing to those who make the pilgrimage. Even if you don't believe in the wonders of the Virgin, you should not pass up the chance to have a peek at the cathedral, whose unprepossessing exterior belies a far more impressive interior,


HIGÜEY
0
400 m
PUEBLO NUEVO
SAN JOSÉ
SAN MARTÍN DE PORRES
Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia
Iglesia San Dionisio
Guagua Station to La Romana & El Seibo
Guagua Station (to Santo Domingo)
Guagua Station (to Punta Cana & Miches)
Río Duey
N
Otra Banda & Punta Cana (42km)
3 (2km) & La Romana (48km)
AVENIDA DE LA LIBERTAD
AVENIDA LAGUNA LLANA
AVENIDA JUAN XXIII
AV. JUAN XXIII
AVENIDA TREJOL
FRANCISCO RICHEZ
VICTORIANO PEPEN
GRAL. MANUEL MARIA SUERO
HUASCAR TEJEDA
FRANCISCO RIJO (CUTO)
REMIGIO DEL CASTELLO
ESQUIBEL
LA TRINITARIA
CLETO VILLAVICENCIO
AGUSTIN GUERRERO
LA ALTAGRACIA
27 DE FEBRERO
GRAL. SANTANA
DIONISIO TRONCOSA
MONTES AGUDO
PADRE BILLINI
CONSTITUCIÓN
CAYACOA
MERCEDES PERRIER
CELINA
PERRIER
EUSEBIO CEDANO
ESTEFANIA BREA
ADAMANAY
HICAYAGUA
DUARTE
JOSÉ A. SANTANA
G. HERNÁNDEZ
FLORENCIO SOLER
PEDRO LIVIO C.
RAMÓN
PUMAROL
TEOFILO GUERRERO DEL ROSARIO
LAS CARRERAS
GASTON DE LIGNE
URSULA MOREL
GRAL. LUPERÓN
DR. STRUCH
COLÓN
DUVERGE
ANTONIO V. HIJO
ARZOBISPO NOVEL
BELLER
MELLA
REYNOSA
FELIX S. DUCOUDRAY
MANUEL GÓMEZ
DANIEL HERRERA
EDUARDO MOREL
JOSÉ R. PAYAN
SANTIAGO
JUAN PONCE DE LEON
SÁNCHEZ
BIENVENIDO CREALES
ACCOMMODATION
Don Carlos B
Hotel Santa Clara A
EATING & DRINKING
Mesón de Cervantes 2
La Parrillada 3
Pica Pollo 1
A
B
1
2

containing some stunning modern stained-glass windows and an inventive carved wooden altarpiece. A further hour can happily be whiled away, browsing the bustling market.

Arrival and information

Higüey serves as a major **public transport** hub for the southeast, which means you'll probably be passing through (and may well have to change buses or guaguas) if you're travelling between Santo Domingo, San Pedro or La Romana and Punta Cana/Bávaro or Miches. All transport to and from the west arrives at or around the **bus stations** across the street from the basilica, where you can also catch a private bus to Punta Cana/Bávaro. Guaguas to Santo Domingo (every 30min until 7pm; 2hr30min; RD$220), La Romana and El Seibo (every 30min until 7pm; 1hr; RD$90) all leave from roads around the basilica (see below).

To catch a **guagua** to Punta Cana (RD$110), you'll have to head well east of the basilica to the terminal on Libertad and Luperón, though if you're transferring from one bus to another the first driver should drop you at your next guagua station if you ask. Just behind the Punta Cana guagua station is the one to Miches, via Cerro Gordo (every 45min; 3hr). Minivans to Boca de Yuma leave a few blocks from the basilica, down Avenida Trejol (every 30min; 1hr; RD$50).

Banks and **ATMs** are liberally sprinkled along Avenida Agustín Guerrero between the basilica and Iglesia San Dionisio.

The Town

Rendered in concrete (of course), the 80m arch of the modernist **Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Merced** (daily 6am–7pm; free), centre of the town's religious activity, is visible from every point in the city, which at least makes it easy to get your bearings if lost. Also featuring on the fifty peso note, it is supposed to represent two hands folded in prayer.

Two vast bronze doors covered in gold leaf mark the basilica's entrance, one depicting scenes from the history of the city, the other narrating the story behind the basilica. Love it or loathe it, you cannot fail to be impressed by the vast vault-like interior comprising a further series of arches that frame the altar, which features a sacred painting of the Virgin. Assuming there's no queue, head up the steps in front of the altar to get a good close-up of the exquisitely carved wooden leaves surrounding the icon. Most stunning when the sun is shining is the vast stained-glass window behind the altar, whose colours range from amber through to blood red.

At the Parque Central, you can check out the more diminutive sixteenth-century **Iglesia San Dionisio**, goal of the annual pilgrimage before construction of the basilica began in the 1950s. A few blocks from the church, along Las Carreras, you'll find the bustling mercado, selling mounds of fresh fruit, vegetables and meat as well as the odd trussed chicken, still clucking. Check out the informal food stalls too.

Just north of town, things brighten slightly in **La Otra Banda**, an attractive residential neighbourhood full of colourful gingerbread houses; you could easily spend some time admiring the wares in Harrison's, an excellent **jewellery** shop right on the road out to Punta Cana with a great selection of local amber and larimar jewellery.

Accommodation

Hotel options in Higüey are limited. If you're here for the Altagracia procession, you'll find these hotels fully booked, which means either checking into a less salubrious joint, or – a pleasanter prospect – staying in La Romana or Punta Cana.

Don Carlos Ponce de León and Sánchez ☎554-2713. This is the pick of the bunch, serving a business clientele and possessing clean, bright rooms with a/c, cable TV and hot water, plus a decent patio restaurant. ④

Hotel Santa Clara Avenida Trejol and Cayacoa ☎554-2040. More basic than the *Don Carlos*, with fan and cold water (extra for a/c), but will do for a night or two. ②

Eating and drinking

There are plenty of inexpensive restaurants and fast-food outlets round the centre of town serving traditional Dominican fare. You'll also find plenty of dancefloors and beer halls throughout town, though nightlife in Higüey is of the traditional, male-dominated, hard-drinking variety.

Mesón de Cervantes Arzobispo Nouel 79, in front of the basilica. Serves terrific local food, including delicious beefsteak with onions.

La Parrillada At the town entrance from La Romana, across the street from the Coca-Cola plant. An Argentine grill; they serve heaped portions of all manner of rotisserie meats.

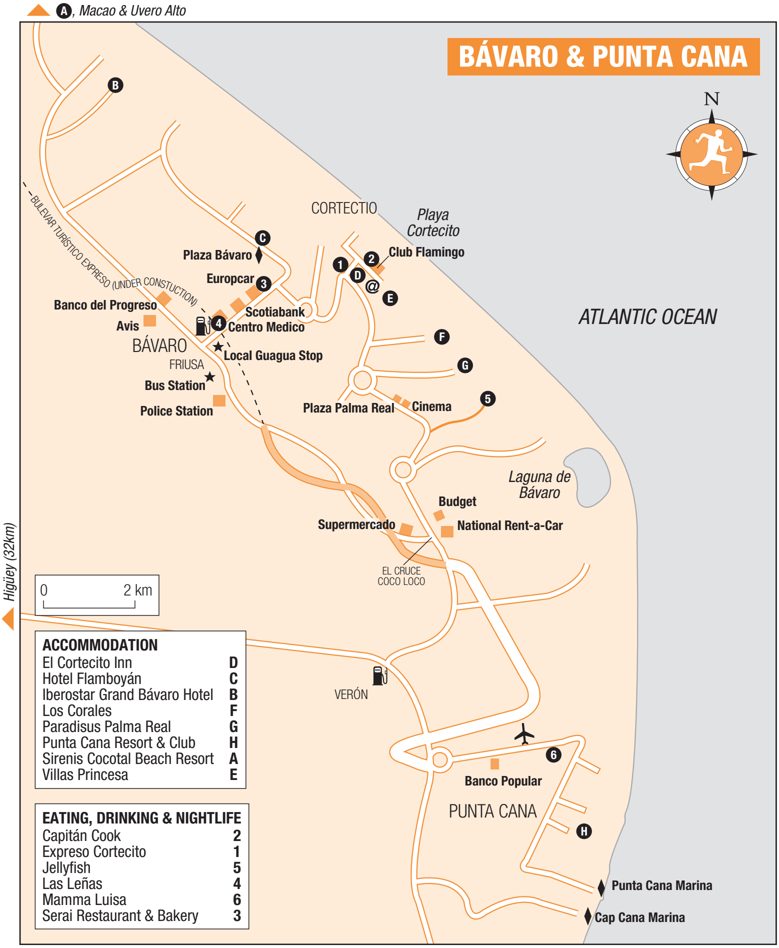
Pica Pollo Libertad and Gaston de Ligne. Inexpensive and tasty cafeteria-style *comida criolla*. Its situation next to the market with a good turnover means you can be sure the food will be fresh.

Punta Cana, Bávaro and around

From Higüey, a paved road winds 40km east to the tropical playlands of **PUNTA CANA** and **BÁVARO**. At one time, Punta Cana and Bávaro were two distinct areas lying at either end of a long curve of coconut-tree-lined beach. However, an extraordinary spate of construction over the past 25 years has blurred the boundaries between them. Nowadays, "Punta Cana" is more of a marketing brand than a specific location, incorporated liberally into the title of most of the hotels in the region, even those 40km north of the regional airport. There are actually very few services in what might be termed Punta Cana proper; most of the action occurs round the plazas in Bávaro, and the dusty urban area surrounding the busy traffic intersection, to the west, known as Friusa. It's here you'll find the bus station and most banks, shops, restaurants and bars as well as the hospital and police station.

Go elsewhere if you want to explore the country, as the individual resorts here tend to be cities unto themselves, encompassing vast swathes of beachside territory, expansive tropical gardens and several separate hotels. And, given the size of the Punta Cana area, development is far from complete. New hotels continue to go up along the coast, malls are erected inland and to the south the vast **Cap Cana** project is well under way (see p.121).

Despite its growth, Punta Cana has not yet reached the tipping point, where the pace and size of construction begin to impinge on the holiday experience. With such an abundance of coast to play on, it has been possible to make sure that no hotel intrudes too greatly on any other. And you can still find, with enough fortitude, glorious stretches of relatively uninterrupted sand, particularly in the north at **El Macao** and **Uvero Alto**. At points where resorts have cropped up, you'll find the requisite concentration of umbrellas, watersports outfitters and beach bars, with occasional souvenir shacks set up in between. Aside from the glass-bottom-boat operators trying to drum up business here and there, though, there's relatively little hassle – and the all-inclusives here are the nicest on the island. **Budget travellers** will have to head to the village of **Cortecito** – scarcely more than a cul-de-sac of tourist amenities on a tiny stretch of beach squeezed


BÁVARO & PUNTA CANA
A, Macao & Uvero Alto
Higüey (32km)
N
0 2 km
ATLANTIC OCEAN
CORTECTIO
Playa Cortecito
Club Flamingo
Plaza Bávaro
Europcar
Banco del Progreso
Avis
Scotiabank
Centro Medico
BÁVARO
FRIUSA
Local Guagua Stop
Bus Station
Police Station
BULEVAR TURÍSTICO EXPRESO (UNDER CONSTUCTION)
Plaza Palma Real
Cinema
Laguna de Bávaro
Budget
National Rent-a-Car
Supermercado
EL CRUCE COCO LOCO
VERÓN
Banco Popular
PUNTA CANA
Punta Cana Marina
Cap Cana Marina
A B C D E F G H
1 2 3 4 5 6
ACCOMMODATION
El Cortecito Inn D
Hotel Flamboyán C
Iberostar Grand Bávaro Hotel B
Los Corales F
Paradisus Palma Real G
Punta Cana Resort & Club H
Sirenis Cocotal Beach Resort A
Villas Princesa E
EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE
Capitán Cook 2
Expreso Cortecito 1
Jellyfish 5
Las Leñas 4
Mamma Luisa 6
Serai Restaurant & Bakery 3

between the large resorts – for the cheapest (but still fairly pricey) accommodation, or to one of the business hotels in Bávaro, which would inevitably be away from the glorious beach.

Arrival

Visitors flying to the resorts via a charter as part of a package tour deal arrive at Aeropuerto Punta Cana (Ⓣ688-4749 or 686-9285, Ⓦwww.punta-cana-airport.com), from where they are ferried to hotels in an air-conditioned bus; otherwise resort-goers have to get here by private car, public bus or guagua from Higüey or Santo Domingo. Taxis are usually waiting at the airport and the entrance to the resorts; if not, call Ⓣ552-0617 or 221-2741 for pick-up. Standardized fares should mean you'll pay around US$35 for any hotel in the Punta Cana area, rising to US$50 for El Macao and US$70 for Uvero Alto. Guaguas head to Punta Cana hourly from the bus station in Higüey and cost

RD$120 for an express. It's also possible to come nonstop from Santo Domingo via the Expreso Bávaro bus service (Ⓣ682-9670), which departs from Santo Domingo's Avenida Máximo Gómez in front of the Supermercado Nacional daily at 7am, 10am, 2pm and 4pm and costs RD$350. Return buses to the capital leave at the same times. The drop-off point for the bus service is the Friusa terminal in Bávaro, well away from most of the resorts, but you can catch a guagua to your destination (see p.119).

Information

While many visitors never leave the pampered cocoons of their all-inclusive – except for organized trips – there are services for independent travellers, many of which are located in the series of plazas (malls) that dot the area, and in the adjoining towns of Bávaro and Friusa which lie just inland and serve as the area's main commercial and travel hub (the main bus station is located there). Car rental agencies include Avis at the airport (Ⓣ688-1354) and Plaza Caney (Ⓣ688-1354), Budget (Ⓣ985-2830) and National (Ⓣ688-5069) on Calle Verón-Bávaro, and Europcar on Avenida España (Ⓣ686-2861). Most hotels offer free wi-fi, but their currency exchange can be exorbitant and you're best off finding a bank. Branches of all the main banks are to be found in the Bávaro area, with ATMs sprinkled around the main malls and in the hotels. Punta Cana's main medical centre is on Avenida España (Ⓣ552-1030).

Getting around

At present, driving around the Punta Cana area has its drawbacks. While the roads around and south of the airport are newly laid, things deteriorate the further north you go. A new highway, the grandly named Bulevar Turístico Expreso (Tourist Express Boulevard), is being constructed. A section just north of the airport is already open and the rest should be laid down in the next few years, although locals, all too aware of the delays that have beset previous road-building schemes, are not exactly holding their breath. The Santa Domingo–Punta Cana highway has been ongoing for several years.

In terms of public transport, from opposite the Texaco station at the main junction in Friusa, you can catch a local guagua (used mainly by local resort staff),

Punta Cana tours

Each resort will have plenty of **tours** on offer and many operate their own dive shops, but it's also possible, and sometimes cheaper, to book directly through an independent operator. For **deep-sea fishing** excursions, try First Class Fishing Charters (Ⓣ867-0381, Ⓦwww.firstclassfishing.com; US$99) or Fishing Punta Cana (Ⓣ880-6961, Ⓦwww.fishingpuntacana.com; US$90), which also arrange full- or half-day charters for around US$1200.

A respected dive and watersports shop is Pelicano Sport, based at the *Ocean Blue and Sands Hotel* (Ⓣ688-6820, Ⓦwww.pelicanosport.com), which has low-priced **dives** to local reefs (US$49 per dive) as well as excursions to reefs and wrecks around Parque Nacional del Este (US$99 plus dive costs). They also organize other watersports and various beach-related activities such as **dune-buggy hire** (US$99) or horseriding (US$92).

Exclusively on dry land, D'Volquez Tours (Ⓣ552-1861, Ⓦwww.dvolquez.com; ring for prices) in Cortecito offers **quad-biking tours** of the northern beaches around El Macao (US$65), and Rancho Capote (Ⓣ553-2812, Ⓦwww.cuevafunfun.net) leads **caving** excursions to Parque Nacional Los Haitises (see p.127).

which stops off at most of the major resorts along the coast, running in a clockwise direction south to El Cruce (see p.237) and then back up the Bulevar Turístico. It may take a while to get where you're going, but it will be a fraction of the taxi fare.

Accommodation

Most people staying in the all-inclusives are on package tours, so it's rare to actually call up a resort and request a room for the night. You'll get much better deals in any case by booking at home through a travel agent, though you can get some great last-minute deals online wherever you are. All in all, the area is famous for reasonably priced vacations on a truly stupendous beach – provided you're willing to be good-natured about the hordes of fellow vacationers. The privilege of more peace and quiet comes with a high price tag at a few luxurious hotels to the north (around Uvero Alto) and south (Punta Cana and Cap Cana) of the main resort zone, boasting quieter stretches of beach. Most have both standard room rates and an all-inclusive option. The closest you get to budget lodging is restricted to staying in and around the small village of Cortecito in the centre of the resort strip or in a business hotel in Bávaro, a guagua or *motoconcho* ride away from a beach. The beach at **Cortecito** is just as lovely, though small; besides, since all beaches are public in the DR there's nothing to stop you from venturing further along the sand.

Punta Cana

Punta Cana Resort & Club Ⓣ959-2262, Ⓦwww.puntacana.com. This resort clearly thinks it's something rather special – and it's not far wrong. It certainly does its best to ignore all those rowdy all-inclusives along the coast, instead marketing itself as a haven of tranquillity and exclusive living. Its suites and villas are elegant, its stretch of white sand terribly picturesque, its world-class golf courses award-winning, and its restaurants a cut above the rest (although, as you have to pay for them, so they should be). A good choice for a quiet, less family orientated holiday but worth noting that while the US$1000-a-night experience at the opulent Oscar de la Renta-designed villas of *Tortuga Bay* rarely disappoints, the smallish rooms of the *Punta Cana Hotel,* which can be as inexpensive as US$150 per night (B&B), do not always hit the spot as costs mount once you've taken into consideration resort dining, aimed more at the *Tortuga Bay* wallet. ⑧

Cortecito

El Cortecito Inn Ⓣ552-0639. If you don't want to go all-inclusive, this is the place to try. It's on the main street, in the heart of the village, around 30m back from the beach, but is in need of some investment as it's rather run down. Still, the rooms are large, and some have private balconies; there's also a swimming pool and restaurant. Breakfast included. ⑤

Villas Princesa Ⓣ472-4654, Ⓦwww.villasprincesa.com. A set of modern, well-appointed one- and two-bedroom apartments at the quiet, southern end of Cortecito, just 100m from the beach. Amenities include full kitchen, hot water, a/c, balcony, cable TV and wi-fi. Minimum stay of three nights required. ⑥

Bávaro

Los Corales Playa Bavaro Ⓣ552-1262, Ⓦwww.los-corales-villas.com. The apartments here are comparable to what you'd find in an all-inclusive, but a bit more spacious and with small kitchens (but no free buffet food, of course). Each has a small garden or terrace and rates include maid service and access to a beach club with chairs and umbrellas. Located halfway between Cortecito and Bávaro and right on the beach, with fewer crowds than elsewhere. ④

Hotel Flamboyán Av Italia across from the *Bávaro Princess* Ⓣ552-0372, Ⓦwww.bavaropuntacanahotel.com. Bright, well-appointed rooms generally patronized by business people, a five-minute bus ride from the beach. As well as the usual amenities, each room has a small balcony, some of which even overlook some precious greenery. Suites and self-catering apartments are also available. Breakfast included. ④

Iberostar Grand Bávaro Hotel Ⓣ221-6500, Ⓦwww.iberostar.com. This highly acclaimed hotel boasts a grand sweep of sand, over 270 opulent suites (no rooms, only suites with marble baths and hydro massage bathtubs), and a varied selection of à la carte restaurants. There's also a casino, a spa and plenty of activities and evening entertainment. Though high-season rates are around US$600 per night, special offers are available even then for as little as US$200 a night. ⑧

Paradisus Palma Real Playa Bávaro Ⓣ688-5000, Ⓦwww.paradisuspalmareal.com. The top Bávaro resort – slightly more expensive but well worth it, with opulent contemporary architecture, sculpted tropical gardens, luxury suites (all with whirlpool baths, plasma TVs, balconies and free mini bars), Chinese, Japanese and Mediterranean restaurants, a spa and access to the Cocotal golf course. And if your pocket can't quite stretch this far (US$650 a night in high season), the resort's adjoining sibling, the *Meliá Caribe Tropical*, offers much the same setting (albeit a good deal less pampering) for around half the price. ⑧

Uvero Alto

Sirenis Cocotal Beach Resort Playa Uvero Alto Ⓣ688-6490, Ⓦwww.sirenishotels.com. This is one of the better resorts – and reasonable value at US$250 per night – in the northern resort zone, with spacious rooms, 24hr room service and a small casino. They also have one of the finest pools around, shaped like a river winding through the resort grounds and with island bars at each end. The gym and spa facilities are also excellent, and activities for adults and children abound. However, the buffet food – as usual – is uninspired, but there are also eight á la carte restaurants. ⑧

Cortecito, Cap Cana and the beaches

If you're not staying at one of the resorts, head to **Cortecito**, the only coastal village left in the main resort zone. Consisting of little more than a touristy beachfront, a 200m-long main street and a narrow alley of souvenir stalls, it's an agreeable hangout populated by backpackers, independent European vacationers and a slew of Dominican and Haitian vendors. The attitude towards commerce is necessarily more in your face here than at the resorts and you'll struggle to walk 10m without someone trying to get you to look at their stall. Still, it possesses a certain charm and has all the services that independent travellers need: a **supermarket**, **internet** café and a few bars and **restaurants**. At the other extreme, the southern end of the resort zone, past the Punta Cana hotels, is occupied by the brooding presence of **Cap Cana** (Ⓦwww.capcana.com), the would-be resort to end all resorts, which, when complete, aims to be filled with mega-hotels, multimillion-dollar condominiums and Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses. The precise number and scale of each development is still, however, a matter of debate, with the whole project not due for completion for a good few years yet.

To uncover the last remaining stretches of undeveloped, pristine **beach**, head to **El Macao**, a small town 9km north of Bávaro, and Uvero Alto, a little further north still. Both still provide some respite from the relentless resort sprawl and their windy, surf-battered beaches are usually more empty of visitors, save for a few quad-biking or **horse-trekking** tours. However, development has begun to encroach from the south and is due to increase in the near future.

Eating, drinking and nightlife

You'll find a couple of popular beachside **restaurants** in Cortecito in addition, most of the malls contain various fast-food options such as pizza and *pica pollo* though you'll find more sophisticated options, including **sushi** and tapas in the new elegant coral-stone Plaza Palma Real, which also has a **cinema** offering both subtitled and dubbed Hollywood fare. Galerias Punta Cana harbours similar options. After a hard day in the sun, tourists tend to return to their resorts at night though there is the odd independent *discoteca* to check out.

Punta Cana

Mamma Luisa Galerías Comerciales Punta Cana. Dependable Italian bar-restaurant with an extensive menu of pasta, meat and fish dishes offering good value for money and good service. Closed Sun.

Cortecito

Capitán Cook ⓣ552-1061. A wonderful location with patio tables right on the sand and great fresh lobster and grilled local fish in tomato-based creole sauces (mains from around RD$450). The place has a mammoth outdoor barbecue grill that cooks up dozens of lobsters, crayfish, sea snails, calamari and shrimp all at the same time.

Expreso Cortecito The place to grab a bandera or a reasonable plate of stewed beef, *ñame* and rice for under RD$100.

Bávaro

Jellyfish Playa Jellyfish ⓣ840-7684, ⓦwww.jellyfishrestaurant.com. Lovely, airy restaurant on the beach tastefully furnished in bamboo and rattan. Book a table on the fabulous, elevated top deck overlooking the ocean. The place also has mounds of cushions and loungers on the sand itself – a great place to unwind with a cocktail. Specializing in seafood, the mains are predictably pricey (from around RD$600), especially given that cheekily you pay extra for accompaniments. Cash only.

Las Leñas Plaza El Tronco, Friusa. This great little inexpensive bakery-café provides a welcome oasis of calm amid the roaring traffic with comfy indoor and patio seating. Tasty rolls, pastries, cakes and empanadas are on offer, to be washed down with a selection of teas, coffees and *batidas*. Early evening happy hour (6–8pm); it's a nice spot for a quick drink and there's free wi-fi. Mon–Sat 6am–9pm, Sun until 3pm.

Serai Restaurant & Bakery Plaza La Realeza, Av España ⓣ552-0739. A gastronomic tour de force through Asian cuisine – Thailand, China, Japan, India, Malaysia and Vietnam are all represented and dishes are made to order (you can watch them being made behind the glass divide) according to the required degree of spiciness. A welcome respite for vegetarians too. Closed between lunch and dinner, and Tues.

Lagunas Redondo y Limón

To head north of Uvero Alto requires retracing your steps back to Highway 105, the surprisingly well maintained road that passes through the centre of El Macao. You'll need to follow it inland to where it joins up with Highway 104. From here, Highway 104 north is paved – albeit in various states of repair from good to challenging – for 60km to Miches, passing through a series of small villages along the way. At around the 30km point, a marked turnoff within the town of Laguna Nisibón leads east to **Playa Nisibón**, the entry point to a glorious, uninterrupted stretch of sand – picture Punta Cana and Bávaro without a single hotel.

The beaches are finally cut off by twin mangrove lagoons protected as a single national park that will captivate serious birdwatchers and casual nature-lovers alike, some 20km northwest of Varma via Highway 104. The westernmost, **Laguna Redondo**, is particularly difficult to reach – though a rusted sign points to the turnoff – and you can only get to its banks with a 4WD. There are no boats dedicated to taking travellers out, though occasionally a fishing boat nearby can be enticed to do the job for a few hundred pesos. Even if you're stuck on shore, you'll see a number of birds, including the predatory ospreys, egrets, roseate spoonbills and herons.

More accessible is the spectacularly beautiful and serene **Laguna Limón**, which feels extremely pristine and remote but has a couple of small outfits around it dedicated to tourism. Two separate entrances lead to it from the highway, the first of which is marked by a small **national park station** (daily 9.30am–noon & 2–5pm; RD$100), where a local guide with a boat can be hired. The second entrance is 2km further west; there's no park station here, so you won't be asked to pay the fee. A further 2km on, a dirt road winds 3km down through pastureland to **Playa Limón**, another of the area's spectacular beaches, though the undertow is often strong enough to preclude swimming and it's plagued by sand fleas at dusk. It does, though, make for a scenic walk, and sea turtles lay their eggs here in the spring; take a left to reach the mouth of a local river, where the surf churns sea water into the brackish lagoon and the beach is adorned with patches of mangrove.

Just before the beach stand two **hotels**, surrounded by lush vegetation, which attracts plenty of birdlife. The main draw of both these places is the remote location, as the rooms are fairly basic. The more established, rather laidback *Rancho La Cueva* (Ⓣ470-0876, Ⓦwww.rancholacueva.com; ④), with an attached seafood restaurant, organizes jeep tours and horse rides to Laguna Limón, and trips up **Montaña Redondo**, a nearby hill that provides spectacular views of the lakes, Samaná bay and the Cordillera Oriental. In high season, your tranquillity is likely to be interrupted on a regular basis by visiting tour groups from Punta Cana. Next door is *Hotel Limón* (Ⓣ282-1005, Ⓦwww.hotel-limon.com; ④), formerly *Harley's Heaven*, which has slightly better kept rooms and a handful of nicer bungalows up on the hill above the hotel, with balconies. It also possesses a small pool and you can paddle around in a kayak on the stream that runs through the property.

Miches

MICHES is a little town on the Bahía de Samaná notorious for being the setting-off point for illegal immigration to Puerto Rico (and from there to the US mainland). Dominicans have been known to pay their life savings to local boat captains to be smuggled in small fishing vessels across the shark-infested Mona Passage. For visitors, the lone attraction is Costa Esmeralda, a series of near-deserted sandy beaches extending for several kilometres east of town. Miches provides a good base for exploring the Costa Esmeralda, including Laguna Limón.

The town and beaches

The best way to access the beach is by entering at Playa Miches, directly across the Río Miches from town. Turn left and walk a few hundred metres down the road. You can either walk along the beach or travel on horseback (organized by hotels; US$30); from here the sand continues 8km further, though there are a couple of small rivers to ford. You can also get local fishermen to take you out to Media Luna, a half-moon of sand that peeks out of the ocean at low tide, several kilometres off shore. Trips generally cost several hundred pesos; make sure that the boat is sturdy.

There's less to entice you within town, though the seaside **Parque Central** has a basketball court with popular nightly games. You can find **live music** on weekends at the cockfighting arena just east of town, and there are half a dozen amiable local bars.

Arrival and information

Guaguas approach Miches from all directions, though the quality of the roads leaves much to be desired, especially heading west. Public transport drops off passengers at the petrol station on the east side of town, where decent-sized buses leave for Higüey (every 45min until 5.20pm; 2hr 30min). Frequent guaguas to Sabana de la Mar and El Seibo leave round the corner from each other at the western end of the main road, where the asphalt ends, southwest of the plaza. The last transport leaves around 5.20pm.

A couple of blocks east on Avenida Mella, you'll find a **bank** and a 24-hour **ATM** (not always functioning) as well as a place to make phone calls. There are even a couple of **internet** cafés dotted around town.

Accommodation

In the event you want to stay the night, you'll find several decent options. All these places suffer from periodic cuts in water supply, as does the rest of the town.

Bahía del Este Deligne and San Antonio Ⓣ553-5834. Slightly run down but clean little hotel, which can get noisy at night thanks to two nearby discos. ②

Coco Loco Playa Miches Ⓣ886-8278, Ⓦwww.abatrex.com/cocoloco. The best is located just across the river from town on pretty Playa Miches. Set back among the palms behind the beach, ten simple but comfortable bungalows have hot-water showers and an excellent restaurant. ④

Hotel de la Loma Ⓣ282-1005. Perched atop a high hill and difficult to reach, you're rewarded with spectacular ocean views, a small pool and cosy rooms with modern amenities. There's also an unremarkable on-site restaurant. ④

Pensione Orfelina Duarte off San Antonio Ⓣ553-5233. This friendly, family-run budget hotel has half a dozen tiny, no-frills en-suite rooms, though the new bar-disco next door will ensure you don't get to sleep early. ②

Eating and drinking

The best place to eat is on the ocean-view terrace restaurant of *Coco Loco*, at Playa Miches, which serves out-of-this-world breakfasts-including fresh fruit shakes. *Pensión Orfelina* can also rustle up some tasty home-cooking for lunch or dinner and the ubiquitous cheap chicken takeaways will satisfy the truly budget wallet. If you fancy some music, follow the beat to any one of several small, throbbing discos.

El Seibo

Well off the beaten path, the pleasant cattle town of **EL SEIBO**, smack in the middle of the Cordillera Oriental and a bumpy 40km drive south of Miches, was once the stomping ground of nineteenth-century *caudillo* Pedro Santana, who ruled the Dominican Republic off and on during the period of internecine strife that followed independence from Haiti and continued until annexation by Spain. Whenever Santana was booted out of office by his rival Buenaventura Báez, Santana would retreat here until the next Haitian invasion, when he would be called back to lead the nation's military defence.

The only feature that might count as a sight is the squat **Iglesia Santa Cruz** – which stands beside the Parque Central along the winding main road that bisects El Seibo – a preserved piece of colonial architecture that's still used as the local parish. Occasional renovations have kept its red-brick dome and partially whitewashed limestone facade in good shape, though one of these "improvements" also resulted in the unfortunate plaster Victorian top to the bell tower. North of the city a predominantly paved but potholed road winds through the most scenic part of the unspoilt Cordillera Oriental mountain range to Miches (see p.123); the peaks here are shaped into surreal spires and cones draped with a thick canopy of greenery.

Practicalities

Spreading out along the main road from either side of the church are numerous bars, dancehalls and restaurants – surprising for such a seemingly out-of-the-way town. The cheapest acceptable **accommodation** in town is the clean (but very basic) *Hotel Las Mercedes*, JM Beras 24 (Ⓣ552-3924; ①), which has private bath but no hot water, whereas *Genesis* (Ⓣ552-3024; ③) on Avenida Asonante is slightly more upmarket. The best of the **restaurants** is *Wendy's*, a bright and breezy spot

El Seibo festivals

The *fiestas patronales* in honour of **Santa Cruz**, which take place during the first week in May, see a spirited celebration converge on the otherwise slow-moving town. **Bullfighting** features on the calendar and cattle are paraded along the main road, serenaded with song and eventually blessed at Iglesia Santa Cruz. The **nine nights** leading up to the fiesta are known as *novenas*, similarly festive evening celebrations worth a look if you're in the area.

just south of the park, where you can get decent plate of *mangú* and *baccalao* for under RD$150. For a **disco,** try *New York* or *Wow*, next to *Wendy's*.

Guaguas headed for Higüey leave every 30min until 7pm from the main road south of Parque Central (RD$90). If you're going west to San Pedro, Hato Mayor and Santo Domingo (until 7.20pm; 2hr; RD$165), look for the buses that gather west of the roundabout at the town's northern entrance. North of the roundabout, opposite the Shell station, battered minibuses set off for Miches every 30min until 7pm (1hr 15min; RD$100).

Hato Mayor to Sabana de la Mar

Despite the lush surroundings of the Cordillera Oriental's rolling hills and orange groves, overcrowded **Hato Mayor** remains one of the poorest towns in the region and has little of interest for visitors. Most get just a passing glance anyway while taking Highway 103, the only paved road to Sabana de la Mar and Parque Nacional Los Haitises. **Guaguas** take off from the corner of San Antonio and the highway.

Just 8km north of Hato Mayor is pueblo **Gran Diablo**, which holds an extremely rocky dirt road that leads 5km northeast to a Cordillera Oriental cave system that you can explore with Rancho Capote (Ⓣ553-2812, Ⓦwww.cuevafunfun.net; US$120 per person, US$105 if you get yourself to Hato Mayor), an adventure tour outfit. Tours take in stalactite-ridden, bat-infested **Cueva Funfún** (also called Boca de Diablo), a huge cave system at the southeastern end of the park that holds several separate chambers and a roaring underground river. The popular day-trip also involves riding on horseback to reach the cave. Many of the tour operators in the Punta Cana/Bávaro area book tours to Rancho Capote, which include pick-ups from most of the hotels. You're unlikely to want to **spend the night** in Hato Mayor or its surroundings, but at a pinch you can head to *Centenario*, Mercedes and Hincado (Ⓣ553-4649; ②), the only formal hotel in town, with clean rooms and private bath but no hot water. For **food** try *Azotéa*, on Hincado and San Antonio, which does above-average versions of Dominican staples. A surprisingly pleasant series of outdoor **bars** stand just east of town along Highway 4, the best of which is a combination restaurant/dancehall called *La Hora Azul*.

Sabana de la Mar

Sabana de la Mar is a dusty little port unremarkable but for its use as a setting-off point for the highly recommended boat tours of **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (see p.127). It also happens to be fairly convenient for the Samaná Peninsula; tatty passenger ferries depart three times daily (11am, 3pm & 5pm; RD$200) from the wharf at the northern end of town to Samaná itself.

The Taino legacy

Over the past century a lot of impassioned debate has gone into the question of whether or not the **Tainos** who once inhabited Hispaniola – along with Puerto Rico and Cuba – were exterminated during the initial period of Spanish colonization. Certainly the majority were wiped out – by war, slave labour and epidemic smallpox – but a growing body of evidence points to the fact that some Tainos (perhaps quite a number of them) survived throughout the colonial era and intermarried with the Africans and Europeans who lived on the island from Columbus onward.

The primary evidence for complete **genocide** comes from Spanish authors such as Las Casas and Montesino, who wrote of the absolute devastation wreaked upon the Tainos in the early years of European colonization. According to Las Casas, only a few thousand remained as long ago as 1518, and early sixteenth-century sugar mill owners such as Juan de Viloria claimed that their entire Taino slave workforce had been destroyed by smallpox. Counter-evidence, though, can sometimes be seen at the margins; when Viloria died, his wife claimed that he had three hundred Taino slaves as part of his property, and it seems a reasonable assumption that he hid them in his report to the Crown in order to get a free allotment of several hundred African slaves as an additional labour force. In addition, early colonial records show that most of the first male colonists **intermarried** with locals; some records suggest that as the sixteenth century wore on, Tainos who married Europeans and converted to Catholicism began to be considered Spaniards.

At the very least, the historical record is confused. Various wills and court documents continued to refer to "Indians" in a variety of contexts, and a 1545 census claimed that over half of the sugar mill slaves were Indian – twenty years after the Tainos' supposed extermination. In addition, the vast majority of the island was not under European control and thus would have served as a safe harbour for

You won't really want to use Sabana de la Mar as a base for anything – the **hotels** are pretty substandard – but just west of the town (and a few hundred metres from the entrance of Los Haitises) is the rather special *Paraíso de Caño Hondo* (☎ 556-7483, Ⓦ www.paraisocanohondo.com; ⑥). An amazing eco-lodge designed by its owner-architect that resembles something straight out of Hans Christian Andersen, constructed out of pebbles creatively embedded in cement, with rustic room furnishings fashioned from driftwood and natural products. The stream that runs through the property has been diverted into a series of cascades and a large natural pool to bathe in, which is overlooked by the restaurant. Twenty-eight spacious en-suite rooms (fan and hot-water showers), including a couple of smaller dorm rooms (US$35), and some with private balcony, are primarily divided between a hilltop lodge, affording magnificent views across the bay, and a smaller villa, where the noise of running water happily blocks out some of the rowdier day-trippers (the main downside of this otherwise idyllic place). If you visit Monday to Thursday in the off-season you could have the place to yourself. Room and dorm rates include breakfast. The hotel also organizes trips to the Parque Nacional Haitises (see opposite). Even if you don't stay here, it's worth coming out on a day-trip, perhaps combining a visit with one of their excursions, which are open to non-guests.

Cheaper, more central lodgings can be found at the Evangelical *Apart-Hotel La Visión* (no phone; ①), which offers spotless basic accommodation (hot or cold water, fan or a/c) with firm beds. You can get good fresh **seafood** at *Parador del Mar* on the town wharf. Round the corner at the park there is a small **museum** that is undergoing refurbishment and until then is unlikely to gain many plaudits.

Taino communities as well as *cimarones*; in 1555 four large Taino villages were discovered along the island's north coast, and there were likely many more in the isolated mountain regions.

As a result, various tests of Dominican and Puerto Rican **genetics** have been performed in order to establish to what extent the current inhabitants of the Greater Antilles are descended from Tainos, and some have purported to find definitive traces of Taino in the current population. A recent study of DNA in hair samples of **Puerto Rican** citizens found that about half of them had some Taino heritage, while a study of blood types in the Dominican Republic indicated that today's Dominican people get around 15 percent of their genes from the Tainos.

The question of the Dominican Republic's continuing Taino heritage is a lot trickier than it looks at first sight, though, in large part because the Tainos have been used by Dominican intellectuals in the past to cover up the nation's more extensive **African** background. **Dominican mulattos**, for example, are still officially classified as "Indios", and many mainstream anthropologists become understandably suspicious whenever they hear someone pressing the case for the Taino heritage of the Dominican people. Even though it now appears that the Dominican people do possess significant Taino heritage, the African debt is much greater, and much harder for many to admit due to **racism** and widespread mis-education in schools.

Regardless, Dominican culture owes a profound debt to the Tainos. Dominican Spanish is interspersed with hundreds of Taino words and inflections, the pantheon of spirits in **Vodú dominicana** – a largely African religion – includes several divisions of Taino spirits, and the Taino methods of farming, cooking, weaving and boat-building are still widely performed throughout the country even today. In the most rural *campos*, villagers still call to each other from hill to hill with signals blown through conch shells whenever fresh meat or ice has arrived for sale.

Parque Nacional Los Haitises

PARQUE NACIONAL LOS HAITISES, a massive expanse of mangrove swamp that protects several Taino caves, 92 plant species, 112 bird species and a wide variety of marine life, spreads west of Sabana de la Mar around the coastal curve of Bahía de Samaná. Though it covers twelve hundred square kilometres in total, only a small portion is open to the public, most of which is accessible by organized tour.

Along the coast it holds the country's largest unblemished expanse of red and white mangroves; in the near-impenetrable interior, dense, trail-less rainforest predominates, punctuated by the ruins of long-abandoned sugar plantations and numerous cave systems. What you'll see on the boat tours is a series of virtually untouched mangrove rivers along with small islands and coastal caves that provide habitat for untold numbers of tropical birds; some of the caves, too, bear Taino petroglyphs.

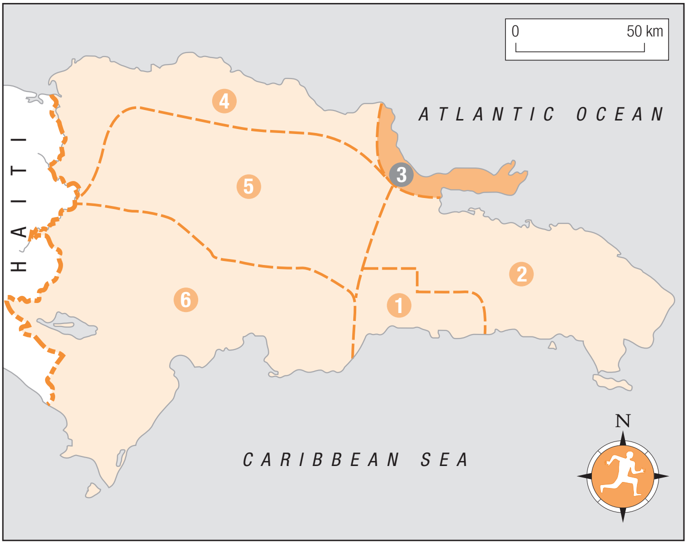
The 2hr 30min standard boat trip hits two main areas of interest within the park. Heading out through the mangroves the boat's first stop is **Cueva Arena**, a large grotto that has numerous Taino drawings of families, men hunting, supernatural beings, whales and sharks. Some tours stop briefly at the beach cove here offering the opportunity to get a good look at **Cayo Willy Simons** – once a hideout for the infamous pirate – recognizable by the dozens of birds circling around: pelicans, herons, terns, frigates, even an occasional falcon. To reach the second cave, you pass the ruins of a hundred-year-old banana wharf, with pelicans and terns perched on the remaining wooden pilings, before pulling up at **Cueva de la Linea**, once intended to hold a railroad station for the sugar cane that was grown in the area. In pre-Columbian times, the cave was a Taino temple; look for the guardian face carved at the entrance, and residues of ancient campfire smoke and innumerable pictographs along the inside walls. Some tours include a short forest walk, and longer trips costing slightly more also take in the grottoes **San Gabriel and Remington**, both with Taino faces carved into their walls. The two caves were also known as temporary homes of various pirates, including Cofresí, Jack Banister and John Rackham.

Practicalities

Almost everyone who comes to Los Haitises chooses to explore the park by **boat**, mostly because this is doable in a half-day trip. The *Paraíso de Caño Hondo* hotel in Sabana de la Mar, located right at the park entrance, 12km west of the town itself, offers the basic guided tour (in English if required) for RD$850 (plus park entry, RD$100) per person. It also offers longer, pricier excursions involving other stops. A slightly cheaper option, generally a negotiable RD$2000 per person, is to go with one of the local boatmen from the Sabana Tours office (daily 7am–6pm), one block from the park. Some of them have been certified as guides by the parks office – ask to see their certification – though their boats still leave from the same jetty at the park entrance and tours will be predominantly in Spanish. Transport to the park entrance is not included in the tour price, though the guides can often arrange for a *motoconcho* to take you the 12km to the park jetty (RD$250–300) though you can just as easily do that yourself. Other tours, however, leave from Samaná, across the bay (see p.134). One of the best day-trips is offered by Whale Samaná (Ⓣ538-2494, Ⓦwww.whalesamana.com; US$58), the town's most respected whale-watching operator, which on Wednesdays and Saturdays out of the whale-watching season, if numbers are sufficient, combines a tour (in English if desired) of the caves with a kayak excursion into the mangroves. It is not possible to visit the park on your own.

3

The Samaná Peninsula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ATLANTIC OCEAN
CARIBBEAN SEA
HAITI
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CHAPTER 3

Highlights

- **Whale watching, Samaná** One of the world's finest, most dependable wildlife spectacles. More than 4000 humpback whales visit Dominican waters from mid-January through mid-March, during which time you're almost guaranteed a sighting. **See p.136**

- **Las Galeras** You can truly get away from it all in this idyllic outpost at the far end of the peninsula, offering rugged clifftop walks, secluded coves and a number of great hotels and restaurants. **See p.141**

- **Playa Rincón** The island's finest beach, where you can relax beneath swaying palms, swim in clean, clear waters and then lunch on fresh grilled fish. **See p.144**

- **Dining out in Las Terrenas** Las Terrenas has a more diverse and higher-quality set of gourmet restaurants than anywhere in the country, and most of them are set right on the beach. **See p.145**

- **Salto El Limón** An impressive 50m waterfall reached by a gentle horseback trek through pleasant countryside. **See p.155**

▲ Playa Rincón

3

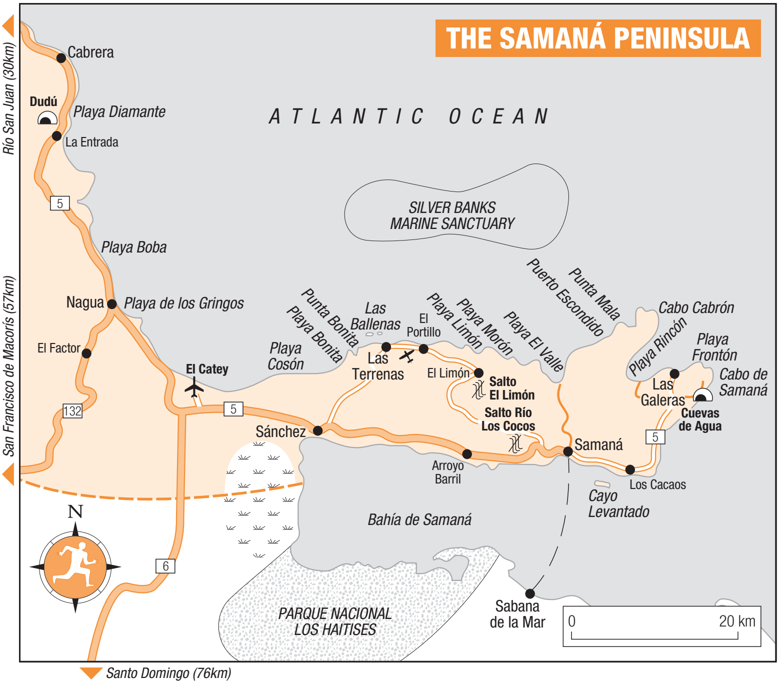
The Samaná Peninsula

It's easy to appreciate the beauty of the **Samaná Peninsula**, a thin strip of land poking out from the Dominican Republic's northeast corner into the Atlantic Ocean. Arguably the most appealing part of the whole country, the region boasts a coast lined with spectacular beaches that epitomize the glorious Caribbean archetype of powdery white sand, vast banks of swaying coconut trees and transparent green-blue sea. Away from the water, the Cordillera Samaná, an imposing mountain range thick with sixty different types of palm tree and possessing a few impressive waterfalls, supports the peninsula, most of it penetrable only by horse.

Perhaps more than for the beaches and spectacular geography, visitors come for the opportunity to see up close the thousands of **humpback whales** that migrate to the Bahía de Samaná during the winter. **Whale watching** has become a thriving local industry – with regulations in place to preserve the safety of the whales – peaking between mid-January and mid-March, when sightings are virtually guaranteed. Most whale boats depart from the town of **Santa Bárbara de Samaná** (generally shortened to "Samaná"), the largest on the peninsula and within easy shouting distance of several terrific beaches – including **Cayo Levantado**, the original Bacardi Island. If the hustle and bustle of the more typical Dominican towns becomes too much, head east to **Las Galeras**, a pristine horseshoe of sand that, despite some development in recent years, still maintains an air of tranquillity. A short drive away are the **Cuevas de Agua**, the peninsula's most impressive Taino archeological site; alternatively, take a boat ride north to isolated **Playa Rincón**, one of the country's top beaches. Along the peninsula's north coast you'll find the remote expat colony of **Las Terrenas**, a burgeoning beachside hangout for independent travellers with a decent nightlife scene. Day-trips easily made from here include to untamed **Playa Bonita**, the largest Samaná beach of all and horseback excursions to the remote and thundering waterfall **Salto El Limón**.

Until the late nineteenth century, a narrow channel separated the Samaná Peninsula from the Dominican mainland, making it a hotbed for pirates, whose smaller ships used the channel to evade the bulkier galleons that couldn't make it through.

Since then, sediment has slowly glued the peninsula onto the mainland; where once the water flowed, a fertile flood plain lies, packed with rice paddies. The


THE SAMANÁ PENINSULA
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Cabrera
Dudú
Playa Diamante
La Entrada
Río San Juan (30km)
5
Playa Boba
SILVER BANKS
MARINE SANCTUARY
Nagua
Playa de los Gringos
El Factor
San Francisco de Macorís (57km)
132
El Catey
5
Punta Bonita
Playa Bonita
Playa Cosón
Las Ballenas
El Portillo
Las Terrenas
Playa Limón
Playa Morón
Playa El Valle
Puerto Escondido
Punta Mala
Cabo Cabrón
Playa Rincón
Playa Frontón
Cabo de Samaná
Las Galeras
Cuevas de Agua
El Limón
Salto El Limón
Salto Río Los Cocos
Sánchez
Arroyo Barril
Samaná
5
Los Cacaos
Cayo Levantado
Bahía de Samaná
N
6
PARQUE NACIONAL
LOS HAITISES
Sabana de la Mar
0
20 km
Santo Domingo (76km)

peninsula's gateway town **Sánchez** is situated here. Once a famous port that now derives most of its income from shrimp farming, it is of little intrinsic interest to visitors but is an important transportation hub, providing guagua connections with Samaná and Las Terrenas.

Samaná and around

Protected on its southern side by an elongated strip of land that breaks apart into a series of small islands, **SANTA BÁRBARA DE SAMANÁ** possesses a remarkably safe harbour. Naturally shaped to blunt the impact of hurricanes and tropical storms and with shoals and breakers allowing entry via only one small bottleneck, it's the perfect spot to ward off unwelcome intruders. Strangely, this tremendous strategic potential has never been fully realized, despite five centuries of international political wrangling.

Today Samaná is a middle-ranking tourist town that so far has managed to avoid the excesses of the all-inclusive boom and until recently acted as a focus for travellers wishing to get away from the larger resorts. However, the opening of a number of all-inclusive hotels in and around town by the Bahía Principe chain may soon change all that. Samaná's best attribute may well be its convenience as an inexpensive base from which to explore some of the peninsula's more compelling sights. Many visitors use it as a setting-off point for **whale watching** and exploring the area's beaches, returning at night for the busy outdoor nightlife along the **Malecón**. Several companies also offer boat tours of **Parque Nacional Los Haitises**, an enormous mangrove reserve across the bay (see p.127).

Also worth going out of your way to discover is Samaná's English-speaking community descended from African-American freemen and women, who hold a series of interesting **harvest festivals** from August through October (see p.138).

Some history

Before European colonization the harbour was one of the settlements of the **Ciguayos** – an initially distinct ethnic group that was ultimately assimilated into Taino culture – that dotted the peninsula's south coast. The Ciguayos lived near the Caribes and borrowed some aspects of Caribe culture, including the bow and arrow, elements of their language and black and red body paint. When Columbus landed at Playa Las Flechas just east of town in January 1493, the Ciguayos greeted his men with a flurry of arrows that forced the Spaniards back to their ships. A week later, the admiral met Chief Cayacoa aboard the *Niña*, repaired their differences and formed an alliance; the Ciguayos later assisted in subjugating the remaining four Taino *caciques*, only to be pacified themselves in the early sixteenth century.

Spain officially founded Santa Bárbara de Samaná in 1756 with transplants from the Canary Islands. In 1795, though, Spain handed the entire island over to **Napoleon Bonaparte**, in exchange for territory he controlled in Spain. Bonaparte quickly had blueprints drawn up of his dream New World capital, to be located in Samaná, but widespread chaos on the island – including a revolution in Haiti, two British invasions and civil war among the French commanders – prevented Bonaparte from taking control of the Dominican Republic for almost a decade. When the French finally received their colony in 1802, they were besieged by both a well-organized Haitian force and another British invasion and they soon capitulated.

The **United States**, too, went to some effort to acquire Samaná, inadvertently toppling two regimes in the process. In 1855, General Pedro Santana entered

Piracy in the Samaná Bay

The Spaniards made little use of Samaná harbour for the first two centuries of their rule, paving the way for **pirates** to take advantage of the narrow Samaná Channel and the snarl of limestone caves within the dense swamps of Los Haitises. The most notorious of these ne'er-do-wells was England's **Joseph Bannister**, an official government privateer condemned to outlaw status by the 1670 Treaty of Madrid between England and Spain. In 1690 Bannister was anchored at Samaná with a frigate and another smaller vessel when two English warships tried to enter the harbour to arrest him. Bannister took his boats to the nearby island of Cayo Levantado and moved his men ashore along with some heavy artillery. The incoming warships were thus put directly in the line of fire and 125 English soldiers were killed as they cruised into the teeth of Bannister's defences. Bannister's large vessel was also destroyed in the melee; when his two-hundred-man crew found out that the ship was gone – and that the smaller one could accommodate only a quarter of them – they stampeded aboard the light craft, forty of them killed in the process. Bannister, though, got away and the islands surrounding the Samaná harbour have been known ever since as the Bannister Cays.

into formal negotiations with the Americans to allow for the annexation of the peninsula and its harbour, a move that proved fatal to his government as Haiti – eager to prevent the US from gaining a foothold here – invaded and Spain sent aid to local rebels. Santana's successor, Buenaventura Báez, reopened negotiations in 1870 with President Ulysses S. Grant, who wanted Samaná to become the US's main Caribbean port, finally agreeing to annex the island for US$150,000. The treaty was rejected by the isolationist US Senate, so the desperate Báez turned instead to private American investors, who signed a 99-year lease with him that gave them total political control over Samaná. Before the Americans were able to take it over, though, Báez was deposed and the contract rescinded.

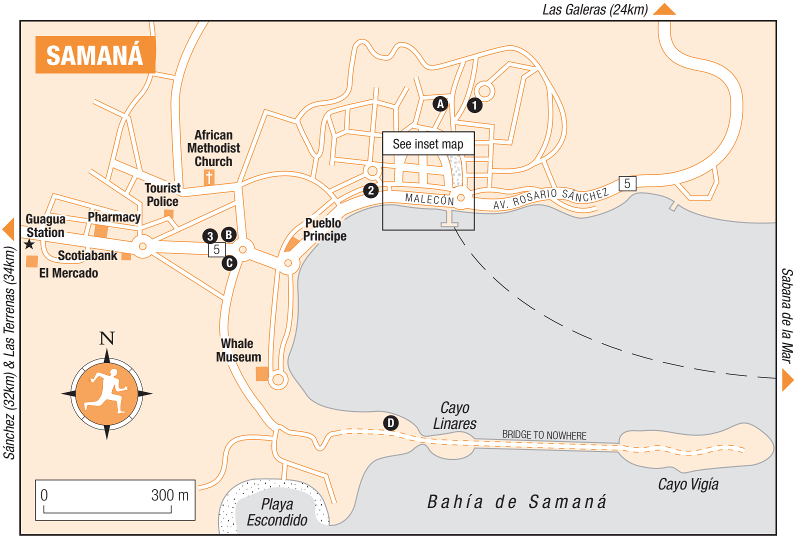
Samaná

Looking out over Samaná harbour today, you can still get an idea of the great city Napolean envisaged. A flotilla of sailboats stands behind the palm-ridged island chain; the port and the wide-open promenade that borders the water bustle with activity; and in place of the impenetrable French fortress that was to jut atop the rocky promontory across from the town is the whitewashed, newly renovated *Gran Bahía Principe Cayacoa* resort. Beyond it, a narrow bridge extends to the two nearest cays. This is due in part to French-descended President Joaquin Balaguer's own failed act of hubris – the transformation of this sleepy town into the largest resort complex on the planet, its design mirroring Napoleon's to the letter. In the early 1970s he tore down the city's remaining Victorian architecture, widened the streets, built three large resorts and secured a World Bank loan to construct several more hotels and an international airport. A bridge was constructed that extended from the eastern point across two of the small islands, in line with the vision of Napoleon, and a restaurant was built on the second. When Balaguer lost the election in 1978, though, the project was scrapped and the tourism complex was moved to Playa Dorada near Puerto Plata. The restaurant never opened and the bridge leads merely to its ruins. Today, the bridge seems like an apt symbol for the town itself, which has a distinctly half-finished and neglected look to it – part neatly maintained holiday town, part forgotten backwater.

Arrival

At one time relatively cut off from the rest of the country, Samaná has become more accessible with a new international airport, **Aeropuerto El Catey**, just west of the peninsula and an even newer highway (RD$600 toll charges) connecting Santo Domingo's airport to the C-5 just west of Sánchez, reducing the travel time between Samaná and the capital to under two hours. The C-5, which stretches along the country's north coast, leads into Samaná's Malecón as Avenida Rosario Sánchez, the two roads comprising the only major thoroughfare in the town.

Most incoming **buses** stop in the centre of the Malecón, easy walking distance from the main hotels; Caribe Tours buses to and from Santo Domingo (nine daily until 2.30pm; 2–3hr; RD$250) arrive at and depart from outside their office opposite the port. **Guaguas** congregate at the terminal by the town market, on the C-5 a few hundred metres north of the Malecón. There are nine daily departures for **Santiago** (last at 2.30pm; 3hr) but frequent shuttles to and from **Sánchez** (1hr;) – the last leaving at 5.20pm – and **Las Galeras**


SAMANÁ
Las Galeras (24km)
Sánchez (32km) & Las Terrenas (34km)
Sabana de la Mar
African Methodist Church
Tourist Police
Pharmacy
Guagua Station
Scotiabank
El Mercado
Pueblo Principe
Whale Museum
See inset map
MALECÓN
AV. ROSARIO SÁNCHEZ
5
Cayo Linares
BRIDGE TO NOWHERE
Cayo Vigía
Bahía de Samaná
Playa Escondido
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A
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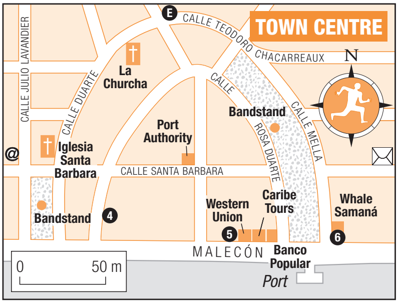
ACCOMMODATION	
Bahía View	B
Gran Bahía Principe Cayacoa	D
Hotel Chino	A
Hotel Docia	E
Hotel King	C

EATING & DRINKING	
Cielito	1
Dave's	2
El Bambú	6
L'Hacienda	4
La Mata Rosada	5
León's Carwash	3
Restaurant Chino	A


TOWN CENTRE
CALLE TEODORO CHACARREAUX
CALLE JULIO LAVANDIER
CALLE DUARTE
CALLE ROSA DUARTE
CALLE MELLA
CALLE SANTA BARBARA
MALECÓN
La Churcha
Iglesia Santa Barbara
Port Authority
Bandstand
Bandstand
Western Union
Caribe Tours
Whale Samaná
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(6am–6pm;1hr). Numerous *motoconchos* are available for anyone who doesn't fancy the walk into town.

Travellers wanting to get to and from **Puerto Plata** should contact Transporte Papagayo (☎749-6415), based in Puerto Plata. They run a daily bus service from Puerto Plata (RD$250); leaving at around 6.30am they will pick you up at your hotel and deposit you in Samaná around 10.30am, with the return trip leaving Samaná at around 2pm. Again, you can arrange a hotel pick-up.

It's also possible to arrive at Samaná via the **ferry** from Sabana de la Mar (see p.125 for departure times), which docks at the port. Return crossings leave at 8am, 9am and noon (daily; 1hr; RD$200). If **sailing**, the port of Samaná makes a good safe place to dock, but you'll have to get a permit from the port authority as soon as you arrive.

Information

On arrival at the Malecón, you may be beset by a number of the local *buscones* (literally "finders"), freelance assistants who speak fluent English and will help you find whatever you need – a whale-watching tour, a hotel, a restaurant and so on. If you're looking for good, cheap accommodation, they can make life a bit easier even if they do have a vested interest in the places they recommend; if you're not interested, they'll (eventually) take a polite but insistent "no" for an answer.

Most services of interest to tourists are to be found along the Malecón and Rosario Sánchez. They include two **banks** with 24-hour **ATMs**, a couple of **pharmacies** and a Codetel halfway up Rosario Sánchez that offers **internet** access as well as international phone calls. Compucentro (closed weekends) has **internet**, a block back from the Malecón on Santa Bárbara, where the **post office** (Mon–Fri 8am–3.30pm) is also located.

The official **tourist office** (Mon–Fri 8–5pm; ☎538-2332) is also on Santa Bárbara, but you'll probably get more information from your hotel or from one of the tour operators.

Accommodation

Samaná has a fair mix of **accommodation**, from luxury resorts to dirt-cheap options, but you'll find greater variety in nearby Las Terrenas or Las Galeras. The area's all-inclusive resorts offer fairly good deals, although they can't match the fabulous beachfronts of Punta Cana.

Bahía View Circunvalación ☎538-2186, ✉asavachao@aol.com. The Pueblo Principe complex now rather obscures the eponymous views, but this is still the town's best option for budget travellers, with a friendly proprietor, better-than-average rooms and private showers. The nice, small restaurant below has a great people-watching patio. ③

Humpback whales

Humpback whales have used the Dominican Republic's Samaná Bay and Silver Bank coral-reef sanctuary as a nursery and breeding ground for thousands of years. Taino drawings on the limestone caves of Los Haitises depict breaching whales in the Bahía de Samaná and Columbus made note of their presence here in 1493. The whales return each December after nine months of relentless feeding in the North Atlantic; by late January more than four thousand of them, the entire northern Atlantic population, move around the waters of the country's north-eastern coast. They're at their liveliest in Samaná's tepid depths, as males track females, compete for attention and engage in courting displays, while mothers teach their calves basic survival skills. Don't allow yourself to come here during the winter without taking an excursion to see them; the **season** generally runs from mid-January to mid-March.

Adult humpbacks grow to nearly 15m in length, weighing up to forty metric tonnes and are black with distinctive white patches. Their name comes from the singular arching of their backs when they dive. Their mouths are filled with **baleen**, hundreds of fibrous sheets that hang from the upper jaw and act as a sieve that traps tiny crustaceans. On their bellies are **ventral folds** – retractable pleats extending the length of their bodies – which expand, allowing the animals to hold massive amounts of food. Their enormous **tails** possess unique patterns of white blotches, which marine biologists use to identify individual whales in a similar way to human fingerprints.

Among the behaviours you may see while whale watching are: **breaching** – hurling the entire body above the surface before landing back down in a spectacular crash; **chin breaching** – bringing the head above water and slapping the chin against the surface; **lobtailing** – raising the tail and smacking it against the water; **flippering** – rolling the body and slapping the flipper against the water; **diving** – arching the back and then sticking the tail straight up in the air in preparation for a deep descent; and

Gran Bahía Principe Cayacoa Loma Puerto Escondido ☎538-3131, ⓦwww.bahia-principe.com. Imperiously overlooking the town, the remodelled *Cayacoa* has brought some much-needed glamour to Samaná and for a mid-range all-inclusive resort offers good value for money. It makes full use of its vertical dimensions with a top-floor restaurant offering great views and an elevator lowering guests down to the (unremarkable) beach at the foot of the cliffs. In between, the rooms are large and attractively appointed. Entertainment is provided outside the hotel grounds in the Town itself at the purpose-built Pueblo Principe entertainment complex.

Hotel Chino San Juan ☎538-2215. You're paying more here for the great hilltop views of the bay, which you can appreciate from the exceedingly comfortably furnished communal living room-terrace. The rooms themselves, while nicely tiled with firm beds, a/c and hot water, are rather small. ④

Hotel Docia Corner of Duarte & Teodoro Chacarreaux ☎538-2041, ⓦwww.hoteldocia.blogspot.com. Recently redecorated and well situated close to the Malecón, this is a good budget option in town. Clean, though rather cramped rooms with TV but with proper shower-heads in the bathroom and hot water due to be installed. ②

Hotel King Av Rosario Sánchez at La Loba roundabout ☎538-2353. Not the best maintained of the budget choices – though rooms are clean with fan and cold water, and the views across the bay from the communal terrace and ocean-facing rooms are commanding. Rooms with shared bath cost even less. ②

The Town

Samaná may not be the military powerhouse or engine of wealth that Balaguer, Grant and Napoleon imagined, but it's undoubtedly charming, with pretty, spacious neighbourhoods, winding streets that amble up the hills and a warm sense of community. The focus of activity is the city's **Malecón**, a broad, concrete

the **trumpet blow** – a tremendous, low blast that can be heard from several kilometres away.

Humpbacks also engage in the **whale songs** for which the species is well known – an eerie combination of moans and chirps formed into short phrases that are shuffled and put together in a basic form of communication. Only males sing and they do so far more frequently here than in the North Atlantic – which leads to speculation that songs are used to find a mate. Humpback groups in each region of the North Atlantic develop their own distinctive music, but a single song prevails while around the Dominican Republic. This is constantly evolving, probably due to the breeding success of the males who deviate from the original. Therefore, each winter starts with last year's song but this is slowly revised over the course of the ensuing three months.

All of this is done to advance the serious business of **mating and birthing** that takes place in Samaná. The female gestation period is a full year, so calves that are conceived in the bay one year are born here the next; there's a good chance you'll see at least one of the babies, which can weigh over a tonne and are light grey. Mothers give birth at two-year intervals and shed up to two-thirds of their body weight while nursing; if twins are born – as they sometimes are – the mother is forced to choose between them, as her body cannot feed them both. The thick milk enables infants to grow at the astonishing rate of over 40kg per day.

Whale watching as a local tourist industry was begun in the 1970s by Kim Beddall, then an itinerant scuba instructor with no formal training as a marine biologist. She's spent the subsequent twenty-plus years lobbying for government protection of the whales and creating an economic incentive that will protect them should the international whaling ban ever cease. As a result, more than forty boats in Samaná offer whale-watching tours every winter and regulations, again instigated by Beddall, are in place to try and ensure that the vessels don't harass the animals.

African-Americans in Samaná

A large portion of Samaná's residents are descendants of **African-American freemen and women** who emigrated here during Haitian rule in 1824–25. At the time, a movement in the United States worked to repatriate thousands of freed slaves – seeking to escape the pervasive racism in the States – to West Africa, but stories of malaria epidemics made Haiti, the world's only black republic, a more attractive option for many. Six thousand emigrants were temporarily housed in Santo Domingo's Iglesia Las Mercedes before travelling on to various points across the country. About half ended up in Samaná, which the Haitians wanted to develop into a naval base. Despite sustained persecution by the Trujillo dictatorship in the 1940s and a general lack of interest by today's younger generation, the settlers have managed to maintain their culture to some degree.

Some of Samaná's older African-American population – many of them clustered within the sprawling **Barrio Wilmore** that borders the C-5 from the town's west entrance – preserve an antiquated form of English, an oral history of the community's struggles and an array of folk tales and legends. One ongoing custom is the series of yearly **harvest festivals**, community feasts with African-American church music held every Friday from late August to the end of October, a tradition that harks back to the yam celebrations and rice festivals of West Africa; check the bulletin board at the back of La Churcha (see below) for dates and locations, if you're interested in attending.

promenade dotted with outdoor cafés, storefront shops and patches of park, at the centre of which is **Samaná port**, the departure point for ferries across to Cayo Levantado or Sabana de la Mar and whale-watching boats that cruise the bay in winter. Come night-time, during the busier seasons, the Malecón's restaurants and bars buzz with activity and music, a fairly mixed scene of Dominicans, expats and foreign visitors that's both lively and unthreatening.

Across from the harbour you can walk along the so-called **Bridge to Nowhere**, linking the town to Cayo Linares and Cayo Vigía and accessed through a gate behind the *Gran Bahía Principe Cayacoa*. The graffiti-ridden ruins it leads to make an intriguing spot to wander and take in lovely views of the harbour and town and – at the end – a particularly harrowing stretch up a muddy slope to the ruins of the restaurant that was to open on Cayo Vigía. Directly southwest of the *Cayacoa* is the small city beach, **Playa Escondido**, now mainly used by visitors to the resort and rather overshadowed by its more spectacular competitors outside town. The southern end of town is also home to a small but fairly uninspiring **Whale Museum** (opening hours irregular; RD$100), which has displays on the lives of the town's annual visitors, including recordings of whale songs and a 12m-long whale skeleton.

East of the museum, at the western end of the Malecón, lies **Pueblo Principe**, an incongruous-looking commercial centre in bright pastel colours built by the Bahía Principe group to service the clients of its three local hotels. Most of the shops time their openings around the comings and goings of the various hotel groups.

A few blocks back from the waterfront, the old First African Wesleyan Methodist Church of Samaná, popularly known as **La Churcha** and located on Calle Duarte (daily 9am–6pm), tangibly maintains what African-American culture is left in Samaná (see box above). The prefabricated, tin-roofed structure was originally shipped over by the English Methodist Church in 1823, in support of a recently emigrated African-American community that still remains here. These days it's known as the Dominican Evangelical Church and often works harmoniously with the African Methodist Episcopalian Church, another interesting building a few blocks further back. North of this church, a series of winding streets move up the hills through residential neighbourhoods filled with clapboard shacks, muleback *caballeros*, children playing stickball and the occasional grazing cow.

Activities

Kim Beddall's Whale Samaná (formerly Victoria Marine) operation, Malecón (ⓣ538-2494, ⓦwww.whalesamaná.com; US$55 plus US$3 park fee; advance reservations required), run the best **whale-watching** tours. A number of vessels depart from the Samaná port every day throughout the whale-watching season (until around 4pm; US$60) and tracking down a tour will not be difficult. Simply standing around by the port area will be enough to guarantee attention from the men employed to rustle up trade for the various trips, but make sure that you travel with a reputable operator who adheres to the "no more than three boats to a group of whales" rule. Whale Samaná aside, few offer any sort of commentary (although rum may be served mid-voyage).

Most tours whale-watch in the Bahía de Samaná, often with an hour stop-off at Cayo Levantado (see below), which may cost extra, though two operators offer **week-long expeditions** to the country's Silver Banks Sanctuary just north of the peninsula. Aquatic Adventures (ⓣ954/382-0024, ⓦwww.aquaticadventures.com; US$2895) is based in Florida but sails out of Puerto Plata, as does the Turks and Caicos-based *Aggressor II* (ⓣ1-800/348-2628, ⓦwww.aggressor.com; US$2995). Both offer the opportunity for rather euphemistically named "soft encounters" with the whales – in other words swimming and snorkelling in the waters around them. None of the Samaná operators (should) offer this service, as it's against regulations to swim with the whales in the Bahía de Samaná.

If you come to Samaná during the **whale off-season**, you can join one of Whale Samaná's "caves and kayaks" excursions to the Los Haitises swamps (see p.127; US$58). Lunar Tours (Rosario Sánchez ⓣ538-3109, ⓦwww.bavarorunners.com) do a whistle-stop full-day Samaná Peninsula jeep tour (US$79), pausing at places of interest, managing a dip in a river and in the sea while travelling through some spectacular scenery. The highly recommended Tour Samaná with Terry (ⓣ538-3179, ⓦwww.tourSamanáwithterry.com) specializes in cruise-ship excursions but also arranges for smaller private groups (US$340 for 1–4, US$80/person for 5 or more) to do any of the advertised itineraries, including whale watching, and the website has a forum to help people hook up with other interested parties to make up numbers.

Cayo Levantado

Six kilometres out in the bay lies **CAYO LEVANTADO**, the original Bacardi Island photographed in the 1970s rum campaign, though the famous swaying palm from the ad has since been uprooted in a tropical storm. Fortunately, hundreds of others still line the soft white sands. It is now owned by the Bahía Principe group, who run the sole **hotel**, the *Gran Bahía Principe Levantado* (ⓦwww.bahia-principe.com; ⑧) that takes up two-thirds of the island, while welcoming a steady stream of cruise-ship passengers throughout the year to a public beach at the other end of the island. Yet more visitors take the ferry over from Samaná (US$10) and most whale-watching tours and excursions to the Parque de Los Haitises stop off here for an hour or so, which can make it very crowded in high season. Moreover, with the extortionate food and drink prices and constant hassling from vendors, this is no Robinson Crusoe-esque paradise. There are many better places on the peninsula to spend a day on the beach.

Eating

Samaná's best **restaurants**, though charging tourist prices, are concentrated on the four blocks of the Malecón around the port, with a few cheaper local establishments operating just north of the Malecón on Avenida Rosario Sánchez. Note that when a cruise ship is in, the waterfront bars all hike up their prices.

El Bambú Malecón. The best people-watching spot on the front serves a fairly basic, but perfectly serviceable menu of Dominican and international staples – steaks, pizza, pasta – plus some good, fresh seafood. Mains start at around RD$350. Closed Mon or Tues out of season.

Dave's Malecón. A relaxing American-owned joint with some comfy furniture and a good place for a big breakfast, though the extra large *camarones al ajillo* (RD$550) are a house speciality. Free wi-fi.

L'Hacienda Malecón ☎ 538-2383. Affordable French seafood – including a terrific shellfish bouillabaisse – and excellent steaks, in an outdoor café setting. The chocolate mousse is mouthwatering. Closes between lunch and dinner, and on Wed.

La Mata Rosada Malecón ☎ 538-2388. With two decades of experience behind them, the expat French owners of this Samaná favourite offer excellent, creole-influenced European cuisine that can be enjoyed in either an indoor dining room or on an outdoor patio. The seafood is best; try the *filete de pescado a la criolla* or the *ceviche de pescado.* Closed between lunch and dinner, and on Wed.

Restaurant Chino Santa Bárbara. Perched on a high hill overlooking the bay, *Chino* serves generous, moderately priced portions of good but rather greasy Chinese food alongside popular Dominican, Italian and international regulars.

Drinking and nightlife

Samaná has some reasonable **nightlife**, with a couple of crowded discos and a fair few outdoor restaurants that become progressively more lively throughout the night. Long-time favourite for dancing is the dark-blue bunker-like *Cielito* (Fri–Sun; RD$50), which is dark inside with plenty of flashing lights and pounding music. The current social hotspot is *León's Carwash* (daily 6pm until late; no cover), a no-frills venue (though a makeover is rumoured) with a bar serving cheap beer and plenty of room to dance as a DJ serves up a diet of *música variada*.

East of Samaná

East of Samaná, a much-improved road leads past a series of attractive beaches towards untainted **Las Galeras**, at the tip of the peninsula – a pretty spot tailor-made for those looking to avoid the crowds – and the renowned, glorious beach at **Playa Rincón**.

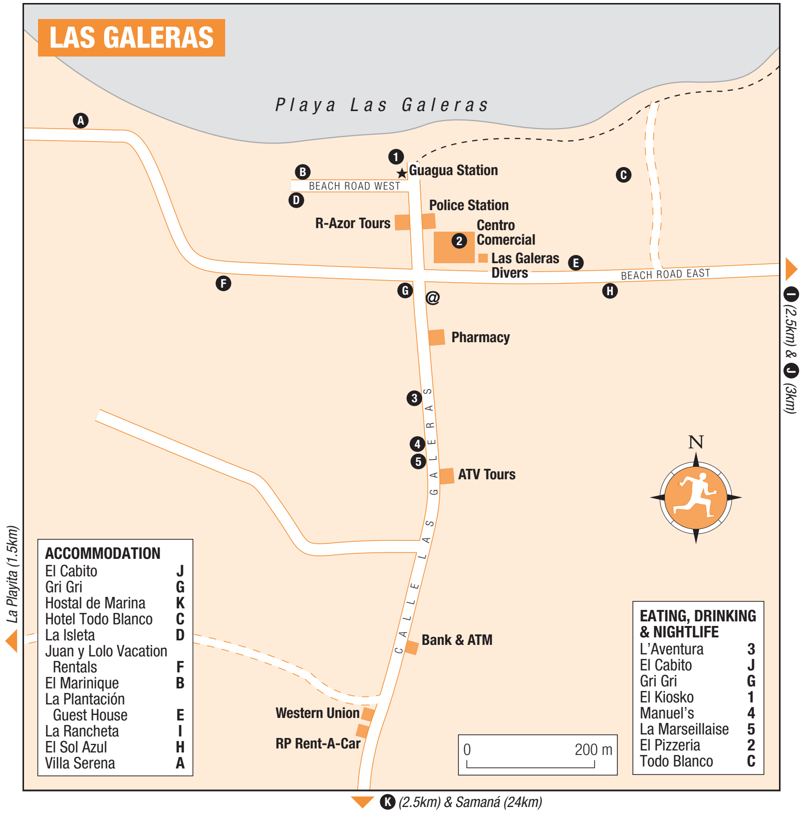
Just east of Samaná along the Carretera Las Galeras, a signposted turnoff leads 11km north up a tortuously bad road to **Playa El Valle**, an entirely isolated beach cut off by steep mountains. A 4WD is recommended, as you'll have to ford a small river, but you're pretty much guaranteed to share the beach with only the inhabitants of the small fishing village on its western bank, though the place now features on the occasional jeep safari's itinerary. A couple of shacks in the village serve good fish with rice and plantains for around RD$350.

Around 15km east of Samaná, just off the main road, an unmarked road leads northeast to a series of prominent limestone caves, collectively known as **Cuevas de Agua**, which once served as homes for the local Ciguayo population. The tiny farms adjacent contain some of the most extensive archeological sites on the island; for a small feel, some of the residents will happily guide you round a selection of the petroglyphs and show you small Taino *cemi* sculptures that have been unearthed at the site.

The road continues for another 500m, ending at a high limestone cliff with more ocean views. Over millions of years, a blowhole, known locally as **Boca del Diablo**, has been gouged out of the cliff; the surf thunders up 50m, spraying anyone standing nearby. From here, a 2km footpath leads down to the beautiful, remote and unspoilt beach of **Playa Frontón**, whose long, thin strip of sand is overhung along its length with swaying palms. Arguably even more beautiful than the more celebrated Playa Rincón, it's definitely worth seeking out either on foot via the spectacular six-hour round trip along the clifftops (take water) or by boat from Las Galeras (around RD$900 per person; see p.143).

Las Galeras

Set in a narrow horseshoe-shaped cove at the eastern end of the peninsula, the sleepy outpost of **LAS GALERAS** is gradually being brought into the mainstream. The road from Samaná has been improved in recent years and the number of lodgings and restaurants continues to rise steadily though they have so far been small-scale, low-impact developments. Despite this growth, the small village has managed to maintain its peaceful and timeless ambience, and its main attraction, a


LAS GALERAS
Playa Las Galeras
Guagua Station
BEACH ROAD WEST
Police Station
R-Azor Tours
Centro Comercial
Las Galeras Divers
BEACH ROAD EAST
@
Pharmacy
ATV Tours
CALLE LAS GALERAS
Bank & ATM
Western Union
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0 200 m
I (2.5km) & J (3km)
La Playita (1.5km)
K (2.5km) & Samaná (24km)
A B C D E F G H 1 2 3 4 5
ACCOMMODATION
El Cabito J
Gri Gri G
Hostal de Marina K
Hotel Todo Blanco C
La Isleta D
Juan y Lolo Vacation Rentals F
El Marinique B
La Plantación Guest House E
La Rancheta I
El Sol Azul H
Villa Serena A
EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE
L'Aventura 3
El Cabito J
Gri Gri G
El Kiosko 1
Manuel's 4
La Marseillaise 5
El Pizzeria 2
Todo Blanco C

sweeping curve of pure white sand, upon which an almost unbelievably turquoise sea laps gently, remains as beautiful as ever.

Arrival and information

Las Galeras is a RD$80 guagua ride (every 30min, 6am–6pm; 1hr) from the town of Samaná, with the last bus or pick-up returning to Samaná at 6pm. The road into town, the Carretera Las Galeras, leads right to the beach entrance, where there's a cluster of beach shacks that constitute a community-run kitchen. Most of the restaurants and bars line the road near the beach or are bunched around the main crossroads, 50m back from the beach, where you'll find most other services, such as the tourist service office, which is actually a souvenir shop and expensive **internet** café (RD$180/hr; 9am–7pm; closed lunchtimes and Sun afternoon). There is a **bank** and 24hr **ATM** in Las Galeras and a couple of **pharmacies**, but no petrol station or laundrette.

You can **rent a car** to get around for US$60–70 a day at RP Rent-Car (ⓣ538-0249) on the main drag, or an ATV for around US$50.

Accommodation

Most of the **accommodation** options are scattered along the beach end of the main road and also on either side of the dirt roads that run parallel to the beach to the east and west, but there are some fabulous, genuine **eco tourism** options just out of town in the wonderful surrounding countryside. There's something for every budget and preference, including the possibility of **camping**.

El Cabito 3km east of Las Galeras ⓣ820-2263, ⓦwww.elcabito.net. Fabulous clifftop location (4WD recommended to get there) close to Playa Madama offering a couple of wonderfully thatched cabañas with ocean-view terrace and breezy open-sided bedroom (mosquito net provided) plus camping facilities with shared showers, kitchen and BBQ. You can pitch your own tent, sleep in a hammock (US$7.50) or even sleep in a tree-house. ④

Gri Gri Calle Las Galeras, no phone. Extremely basic accommodation aimed squarely at backpackers on a budget. The rooms are spartan but clean with hot water, fan (and fridge in some cases) plus some wonderful reproduction furniture – even a four-poster bed in one room. ②

Hostal de Marina 2km south of village on Calle Las Galeras ⓣ829/887-4439, ⓦwww.aubergedejeunesse.info. The cheapest accommodation around, slightly out of town, providing rudimentary but cheerfully decorated fan-ventilated single and double rooms with a shared bathroom, kitchen, bar and social area. You can stock up on supplies at a nearby mini-mart. Breakfast included. ①

Hotel Todo Blanco Off Beach Rd East ⓣ538-0201, ⓦwww.hoteltodoblanco.com. Tasteful in the extreme and a genuine haven of tranquillity with huge airy rooms set in a pretty but enjoyably wild garden right on the beach. Run by a friendly Italian couple and their four large dogs, the hotel also boasts a superb and authentic Italian restaurant, open to non-guests, and gets discounted scuba-diving rates. ⑥

La Isleta Beach Rd West ⓣ538-0116, ⓦwww.la-isleta.com. A stone's throw from the beach, set amid charming tropical gardens, these cheerfully decorated apartments come equipped with kitchens and sleep up to four, making them good value. Hot tub, barbecue and wi-fi available. ⑥

Juan y Lolo Vacation Rentals Beach Rd West ⓣ538-0208, ⓦwww.juanylolo.com. A selection of rustic but rather attractive thatched and self-contained accommodation from a tiny cottage for two to a three-bedroom villa (US$175) sleeping six people. Well equipped, with lounges, full-size bathrooms and fully functional kitchens, offering good long-term rental rates. ④

El Marinique Beach Rd West ⓣ538-0262, ⓦwww.elmarinique.com. One of the first hotels in Las Galeras, *El Marinique* boasts three simple cottages (sleeping two) as well as two well-equipped two-storey apartments (sleeping four) set in a garden just back from the sea. The overpriced accommodation is offset by the warm, personalized service of the owners and the wonderful views (and food) from the restaurant. ⑥

La Plantación Guest House Beach Rd East ⓣ538-0079, ⓦwww.villalaplantacion.com. Twelve sizeable and contemporary en-suite rooms attached to a modern house belonging to a friendly French couple. Rooms are set around a lovely garden with a circular pool and hot tub, very close to the beach. ⑤

La Rancheta 2.5–3.5km from Las Galeras ☎878-0637, Ⓦwww.larancheta.com. Karin and Ron, the multi lingual owners, offer a range of accommodation spread over a farm, from budget dormitories (US$14 per person) with shared kitchen-dining facilities, to four more comfortable self-catering units (fan-ventilated, each with private bath, small kitchen and patio), in a guesthouse set in a tropical garden. Here you can pre-order breakfast and dinner, which use a lot of home-grown produce. Camping in your own or rented tents is also an option. ③

El Sol Azul Beach Rd East, One block inland from the beach ☎829/882-8790, Ⓦwww.elsolazul.com. Lovely B&B with four large, thatched roof cabins arranged around a swimming pool and decorated with local flotsam – driftwood, shells, pieces of coral, etc. Generous breakfasts are served on your patio. ⑤

Villa Serena Beach Rd West ☎538-0000, Ⓦwww.villaserena.com. Housed in an elegant faux-Victorian mansion with a large, manicured tropical garden, this place screams “honeymoon”. Set right on the beach and facing a small deserted island, it’s difficult to imagine a more idyllic location. All the rooms are exquisite, with attention to detail, but try to reserve the one with the wraparound veranda facing the ocean. The restaurant is also one of the best in town (open to non-guests, but call first). ⑦

Activities

There are an increasing number of ways to appreciate the area’s outstanding natural beauty, both on land and on or in the water. R-Azor Tours (Ⓦwww.razortours-excursionSamaná.com) and ATV Tours (Ⓔaugustoescursiones@hotmail.com) are two local outfits with offices in the village that run a range of popular and informative excursions with multi lingual guides. The more experienced and slightly pricier R-Azor Tours’ most popular day-trip is an all-inclusive quad-bike excursion to Playa Rincón (US$75). Both companies can also organize outings further afield to Parque Nacional Los Haitises and El Limón.

A more peaceful way to soak up the surrounding countryside is on horseback. Enzo’s Rancho (☎379-0321 or 829/604-4756, Ⓔenzosranchothikis@yahoo.it) runs **horseriding** trips along the shore as well as whole- and half-day outings from RD$700–900 per person. Alternatively, contact *La Rancheta* (see Accommodation listings, opposite), which offers highly acclaimed riding excursions (half-day US$45–55, full day US$70–90) of the local area, taking in such highlights as Playa Madama, a thin curve of sand in a sheltered bay surrounded by lush green hills and the paradise-like Playa Frontón (full day US$65). You can even spend the night sleeping out under the stars at Playa Frontón, heading on to Boca del Diablo the next day (US$200).

If you’re keen to do a bit more than swim, check out Swiss-run Dive Las Galeras (☎538-0220, Ⓦwww.las-galeras-divers.com) at the crossroads. They charge US$75 for a two-tank dive (plus US$10 for equipment) or a day’s discovery course and organizes **diving** trips around the tip of the peninsula to reefs, wrecks and underwater caves. PADI certification courses are also on offer.

Several **nature trails** have been marked extending out from Las Galeras into the surrounding countryside. Enquire about reliable guides at your accommodation.

Eating, drinking and nightlife

Options for **dining** in Las Galeras have increased as much as have places to stay. Most of the hotels can provide food, but if you want a change of scenery or menu, there’s a mixed bag of eating options dotted along the main road. As far as **nightlife** goes, the village remains pretty quiet, although there are a couple of bars, pool halls and a disco – *Manuel’s*, next to *La Marseillaise*.

L'Aventura Calle Las Galeras. A lively yet relaxed ambience pervades this casually sophisticated bar-restaurant that serves up excellent food. Reckon on RD$250-plus for one of their tasty pizzas to RD$400-odd for a main or RD$900 for a huge seafood platter. The bar area is a lively gathering spot for expats. Free wi-fi. Mon–Fri 4pm until late, Sat & Sun 9am until late.

El Cabito 3km from Las Galeras ☎820-2263, ⓦwww.elcabito.net. You can't beat this cliff top location – magical sunsets, in-season armchair whale-watching and superb food (RD$250 for simple pasta dishes and around RD$600 for fancier seafood mains), including changing weekly specials and vegetarian options. Pick-up from Las Galeras can be arranged. Fish or lobster dishes require advance reservation. Closed Mon.

Gri Gri Calle Las Galeras. Right in the heart of the action in the hotel of the same name, *Gri Gri* dishes out some great Dominican fish and meat dishes with rice or pasta from around RD$350, with *sancocho* a speciality at weekends. Located at the crossroads, it's a great people-watching spot. Closed Tues.

El Kiosko Beach entrance. Not so much a restaurant as a collection of shacks under a large thatch hut run by a community association serving excellent, locally caught seafood dishes and cold beer. Prices can vary for tourists so check before eating, but expect to pay around RD$350 per head for fish with rice and plantains, more for shrimp or lobster.

La Marseillaise Calle Las Galeras. Low-key French bakery and patisserie which also sells sandwiches and snacks, so the ideal spot to grab a coffee and croissant for breakfast or stock up on baguettes for a picnic. Closed between lunch and dinner.

El Pizzeria Centro Comercial. An outdoor patio pizzeria located beneath the Plaza Lusitania, serving possibly the best thin-crust pizza outside Naples. It's a lively spot with very friendly proprietors. Closed between lunch and dinner, and on Mon and Tues.

Todo Blanco Beach Rd East ☎538-0201. Superb hotel restaurant specializing in Italian food cooked from imported ingredients and served in a wonderfully elegant setting. Call ahead for reservations. The menu changes regularly but typically costs around RD$700 for two courses.

Playa Rincón

Hidden from the rest of the peninsula on the upper prong of its easternmost end, **Playa Rincón** boasts the top Samaná beach, bar none. Its pristine condition is maintained by its inaccessibility, with just one rocky road leading there from Las Galeras. Although rumours that a major hotel chain is set to start building on the beach have been doing the rounds for years, development has been kept mostly at bay.

Tucked away at the base of the Bahía de Rincón – which is buttressed on both sides by enormous capes – the beach has long been a favourite of wealthy Dominican city-dwellers who camp out here with their families for the night. Of all the warm, clear waters on the island, Rincón has the very finest – moderately deep with manageable waves and a bright turquoise transparency that can't be matched – combined with a 4km stretch of whiter-than-white sand and a sprawling coconut forest behind it.

Death by coconut

If you're in the vicinity of **coconut trees**, be careful where you park your car. All Dominican car rental agreements have a provision explicitly stating that insurance will not cover damage – usually shattered windshields or dented hoods – inflicted by a falling coconut. More unfortunate, an average of six people per year in the Dominican Republic die from being hit by one of the plummeting fruits. Tropical storms are the most frequent culprits; the high winds sometimes launch dozens of them through the air like cannon shot. Many of the larger resorts and hotels employ people with long poles to knock the fruits from their trees before they have a chance to fall.

Practicalities

The road from Las Galeras should be attempted only in a sturdy 4WD, or via a local taxi (US$38) or quad bike. Several boats also make the trip there daily from Las Galeras; ask around for the best price, with around RD$700 per person the going **rate**. Both water-taxis and vehicles approach the beach near its western end, which is bordered by high cliffs. From here it's another 1km west to **Río Frío**, a freezing-cold river popular for washing off the salt at the end of the day. To the east, the beach stretches uninterrupted for another 3km – you're likely to find few other souls as you walk its length. There are a few **food shacks** set up by the Río Frío and a couple of restaurants at the eastern end of the beach, with *Ruby's* generally considered the best of the bunch but all serve fresh fish lunches, usually accompanied by rice and plantains. Expect to pay around RD$350 per head.

Las Terrenas and around

Set midway along the peninsula's northern coast, **Las Terrenas** has grown over the past 25 years from remote backwater to an expat-dominated resort town renowned for its buoyant nightlife. No village existed here at all until the 1940s, when Trujillo began, in a misguided effort to alleviate urban poverty, to forcibly move the lower classes from Santo Domingo to the countryside, in order that they fish and farm the land; thirty such families ended up in present-day Las Terrenas. Their quiet settlement was interrupted in the 1970s by an influx of French expats searching for a secluded patch of paradise; they were soon followed by waves of Swiss, Canadians, Germans and British. You are as likely to see men playing boules as dominoes while baguettes and croissants are as easy to come by as plates of rice and beans. In the bars and restaurants French satellite TV is as ubiquitous as a Latin telenovella.

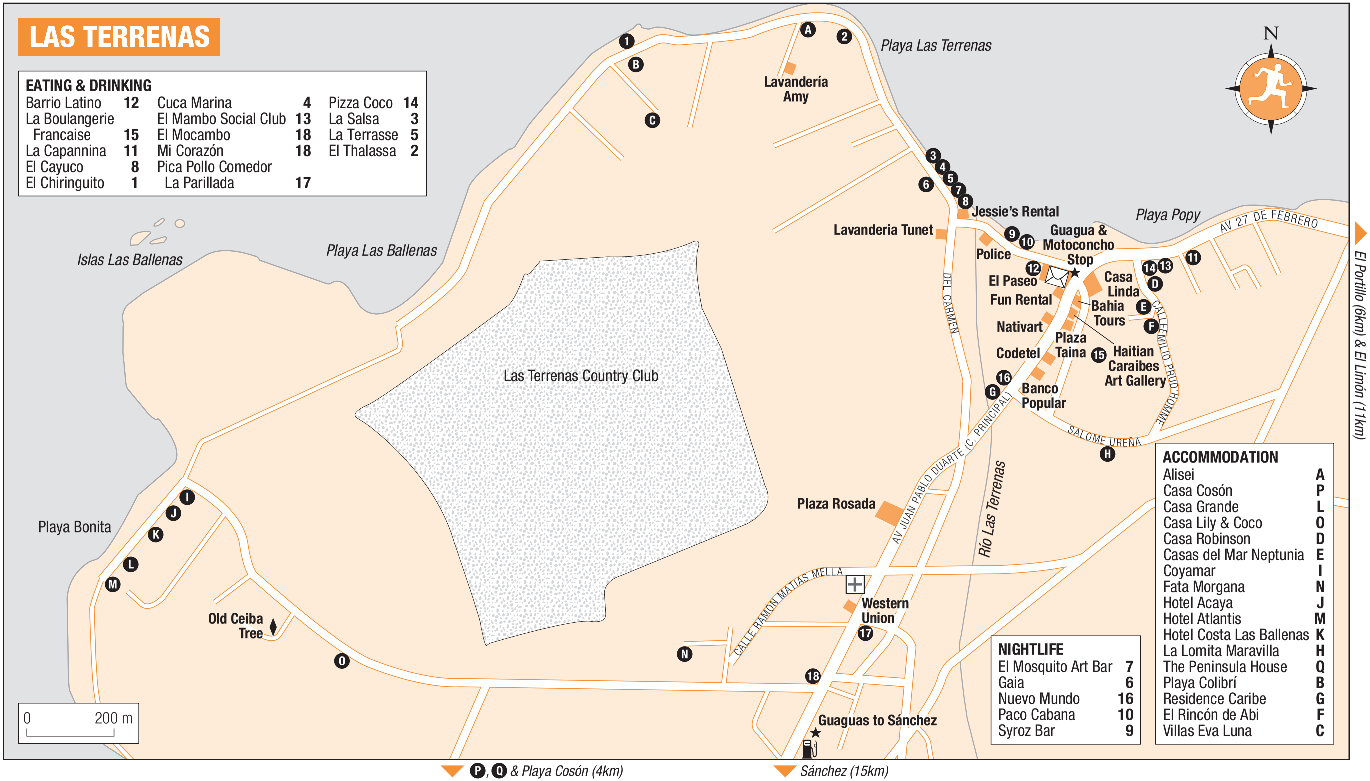
The town makes a pleasant base-camp from which to explore the northern part of the Samaná Peninsula, including the less-developed beaches on either side, such as **Playa Bonita** and **El Portillo** – home to the vast *Bahía Principe El Portillo* resort (Ⓣ240-6100, Ⓦwww.bahia-principe.com; ⑦) – that hold even more appeal than the one in town. Aside from exploring these, a day-trip to the **El Limón waterfall** is highly recommended both for the journey there on horseback and the view of the fall itself.

Las Terrenas

LAS TERRENAS has grown into one of the country's tourist hotspots, especially since the arrival of the international airport at El Catey in 2006, and the new highway from Santo Domingo that has made Las Terrenas an easy weekend retreat for wealthy Dominicans from the capital.

There are two distinct areas to the town: the beachside glitz and glamour of the hotels, bars and restaurants and the inland Dominican barrio, which has been

LAS TERRENAS



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built up into a warren of rough dirt roads with dirt-cheap housing to accommodate the masses of workers needed to sustain the tourism. There is some resentment between the Dominican and foreign communities, centred on the well-founded perception that the expats are making all of the money off the booming tourist business.

Las Terrenas sees its busiest time in the summer when, during July and August in particular, it's swamped with Europeans. The larger hotels and resorts catch most of the traffic but there are enough independent travellers and backpackers to keep the smaller bars and restaurants busy, and everybody tends to come together later in the evening to crowd out the livelier bars and discos to the early hours.

Arrival

If driving, the most direct route is the Sánchez–Las Terrenas road, well maintained aside from a few stretches. It's an unbelievably scenic though twisting drive, passing over the Cordillera Samaná and offering stunning views of the coast. Once back at sea level, the mountain road from Sánchez turns into the town's **Calle Principal** (also known as Avenida Duarte), which runs all the way to the sea, where it connects with the beachfront strip.

Using public transport from the west, Transporte Pepe (Ⓣ582-2134) operates three direct, return **bus** services a day from **Santiago**. Otherwise, catch any Samaná-bound bus and change to a guagua in Sánchez. Transporte Samaná (Ⓣ687-1470) runs five buses daily between **Santo Domingo** and Las Terrenas (3hr), though you'll travel in greater comfort if you travel to and from Sánchez by gaugua to connect with the four daily Caribe Tours (Ⓣ552-7434) buses to and from the capital.

Guaguas from Sánchez arrive and depart frequently from the Esso station at the far end of Duarte (7am–6pm; 40min). From **Samaná**, guaguas run to Las Terrenas on a fixed timetable, offering departures every 60 to 90min; it's often quicker to jump in a guagua (often a pick-up) to the village of El Limón, which leave at regular 15min intervals throughout the day, and change there. All guaguas will drop off at the main junction in town if requested.

These days many guests at the larger hotels arrive at the small **airport** to the east of town. Two airlines offer daily **domestic flights** to Aeropuerto El Portillo: Dominican Shuttles (formerly Take Off; Ⓣ738-3014, Ⓦwww.dominicanshuttles.com), which flies from Punta Cana (one flight daily), and Santo Domingo Las Américas (twice daily) and La Isabela (twice daily), with tickets available for purchase online; and Aero Domca (Ⓣ826-4141, Ⓦwww.aerodomca.com), which operates out of Santo Domingo's La Isabela airport (three flights daily), but return flights stop off at both airports.

It also has a daily flight to and from Punta Cana. One-way fares average US$100–160. **Taxis** into town cost around US$10. From El Catey International Airport, the fare is US$60.

Information

Tourist information is available from the well-established Bahía Tours (Ⓣ240-6088, Ⓦwww.bahia-tours.com), at the end of the town's Calle Principal, which stocks the very useful (and free) and annually updated *Info*, a guide to the Samaná Peninsula. Bahía Tours can also arrange excursions to the El Limón waterfall, Samaná (for whale watching) and Los Haitises.

Getting around

Walking, at least for short distances, is the easiest way of getting around, although such has been the town's expansion in recent years that it takes a good 45min to stroll from the west side to the east. The beachfront roads of the town's western half are currently still predominantly unlit at night and unpaved, though the mounds of paving bricks unceremoniously dumped at regular intervals along the sand suggest that this will soon change.

Motoconchos are in plentiful supply. Rides within town are around RD$50 during the day, double that at night. **Private taxis** (Ⓣ240-6391) and **guaguas** to El Portillo and El Limón are also available at the main intersection. Taxis have fixed rates. There are no guaguas to Playa Bonita or Playa Cosón, so you'll either have to catch an RD$150 *motoconcho* or look into hiring a quad bike (ATV), which are available from at least half a dozen agencies in town for around US$55 a day (see p.152).

Accommodation

Las Terrenas is in a fever of development, with new buildings going up almost monthly on the town's peripheries, the western half in particular resembling a giant construction site. So fast has been the pace of change that the town's infrastructure has struggled to keep up.

With so much new **accommodation**, prices have remained competitive, although real rock-bottom bargains are becoming more scarce. Still, while there has inevitably been some inflation, with several hotels now pitching squarely for the luxury market, Las Terrenas remains a good deal cheaper than most other Caribbean destinations. It's best to make reservations before you arrive – the cheaper places in particular get booked up quickly. If it's peace and quiet you're after, you're better off staying at one of the hotels along nearby Playa Bonita (see p.153) or heading for Las Galeras at the far tip of the peninsula (see p.141).

Alisei Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-5555, Ⓦwww.aliseihotel.com. One of the town's new breed of top-end modern hotels, the *Alisei* boasts 54 luxury apartments (both one-and two-bedroom), nicely styled grounds, a large pool, a large and fairly pricey restaurant/bar and a whole host of activities. The fact that it's on the same stretch of public beach as the rest of the hotels does, however, make it feel a bit overpriced. Breakfast included. ⑦

Casa Lily & Coco On the road to Playa Bonita Ⓣ240-5423, Ⓦwww.casalilyecoco.com. Four brand-new, nicely furnished and fully equipped studio and one-bedroom apartments for 2–4 people. The larger upstairs units have delightful private patios looking out over lush countryside. Owned by a charming Dominican–Italian couple, the only downside is the noise of construction traffic during the day but by 5pm the sound of crickets and tree-frogs takes over. Free transfers to town or Playa Bonita. ④

Casa Robinson Av 27 Febrero Ⓣ240-6496, Ⓦwww.casarobinson.it. This Italian-owned affair has a collection of clean, cheerfully decorated rooms, studios and apartments (with kitchens, sleeping up to four; US$50) dotted about a shady and quiet garden. ③

Casas del Mar Neptunia Emilio Prud'Homme Ⓣ240-6617. The nicest of this quiet side-road's inexpensive accommodation, comprising ten cheerily decorated bungalows with private patios (though offering little privacy) decked with brightly painted furniture and set amid a lovely lush garden. Bungalows have ceiling fans, fridges and hot water. Free wi-fi, with breakfast included. ④

Fata Morgana Off the dirt road to Playa Bonita near the Escuela Francesa Ⓣ836-5541, Ⓦwww.hostelworld.com. Six simple but nice budget cabins (fan, mosquito screens and cold water) with a shared, fully functional kitchen, barbecue and book exchange set in the garden of a house in a quiet residential area, some way from the beach and centre. Internet access available. The cheapest deal in town and ideal for backpackers or long-term stays. ②

La Lomita Maravilla Salome Ureña off Duarte Ⓣ240-6345, Ⓦwww.lomitamaravilla.com. If you want sophisticated luxury and don't mind being away from the beach, this good-value rustic-style boutique hotel, hidden down a dirt road, is the place. Private thatched bungalows are set in a tropical garden, ranging from a junior suite with all mod cons – CD/DVD player, cable TV, a/c, fully equipped kitchens and stylish bathrooms – to a villa with a private pool. Continental breakfast included. ⑦

Playa Colibrí Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-6434, Ⓦwww.playacolibri.com. A good family choice offering spacious self-catering apartments (the largest sleep up to five, not including children) in a series of three-storey blocks laid out in a horseshoe around a central pool and tropical garden. Large rooms with full kitchens, cable TV and good-sized private balconies plus a decent stretch of beach across the road. Guarded parking at rear. Huge price differences depending on the season. ⑦

Residence Caribe Duarte Ⓣ240-6325. Vast, old, colonial three-storey mansion with huge wraparound balconies set back from the road behind a large garden filled with Haitian art. Very basic wooden rooms (fan & hot water) are dark and shuttered but you can't beat the price. Get a room away from the *Nuevo Mundo* side to escape the noise. The owner runs a quad-bike shop so you'll get discounted rates. ②

El Rincón de Abi Emilio Prud'Homme Ⓣ240-6639, Ⓦwww.el-rincon-de-abi.com. A simple, clean and, most importantly, affordable B&B in the heart of the village, around 200m from the beach. Rooms are rather austere, white-washed stone, but clean and fairly large for the price and there's a small pool and bar. The French owners can arrange excursions including horse-riding and jeep safaris. ④

Villas Eva Luna Marico, off Calle de la Playa Ⓣ978-5611, Ⓦwww.villa-evaluna.com. The perfect couple's getaway, this is a haven of peace and quiet set 300m back from the western beach, away from the scooter and quad-bike bustle of central Las Terrenas. It boasts five stylish, Mexican-style villas that sleep two or four, with private terraces, kitchens and king-size beds, set around a small central pool and garden. Yoga, massage and aqua-gym are also on offer. Breakfast is included but it's still on the expensive side. ⑦

The Town

Aside from spectacular day-trips to the surrounding countryside, the **beach**, which extends uninterrupted 2km in either direction from town, is the focus of daytime entertainment. The stretch to the east of the main intersection is the older, more established core of the resort, lined with hotels, low-end cabañas and bars until the construction suddenly peters out entirely. Of late, the waters here have become increasingly populated by kitesurfers, windsurfers and surfers at the far end of town near Playa Portillo.

The western beach, which stretches to **Playa Las Ballenas** – a section of the beach named for three oblong islands in the waters that resemble breaching humpback whales – is the more up and coming area, with a livelier, funkier feel. Here, several old fishing shacks have been renovated to house a cluster of restaurants and bars, but they stand far enough away to leave the sand undisturbed. The ocean is calm and good for swimming – albeit rather thick with seaweed in places – protected by a coral reef 100m out that provides decent snorkelling.

In the bustling centre of the town, the three malls **El Paseo**, **Plaza Taina** and **Casa Linda** dominate the main intersection, with a number of **souvenir shops** tucked away in their corners. El Paseo holds a French-dominated food and craft fair on Saturday mornings until noon.

The most interesting shop is **Haitian Caraibes Art Gallery**, Plaza Taina (10am–8pm, closed Sun), with one of the best selections of Haitian Naivist art and folk crafts outside of the capital. Also worth exploring is **Nativ'Art**, just across the street (9.30am–7pm, closed Mon), with imitation Taino sculpture, sarongs and amber and larimar jewellery. The best selection of jewellery though can be found at **Terrenas en Plata** in El Paseo, but steer clear of the endangered coral pieces.

Further south along Calle Principal, you'll enter the original Dominican **barrio**. There's much more local flavour to the streets here and the souvenir shops tend to be cheaper, but the heady cloud of exhaust fumes that fills the air can be a little stifling at times.

Las Terrenas adventure outfitters

If you get tired of lounging on the beach, there's no end to the number of ways in which you can fill your days more actively. Most of the specialist operators listed below also offer excursions outside their area of expertise, such as whale watching or a trip to Parque Nacional Los Haitises; these are often sub-contracted out to other specialists, usually at no greater cost – but check around.

Diving

Las Terrenas Divers Playa Bonita (Ⓣ889-2422, Ⓦwww.lt-divers.com). Based in the *Hotel Costa Las Ballenas*, this German-run outfit offers dives across the northern coast of the peninsula, including the caves, plus PADI and CMAS courses. Costs range from US$38 for a single dive to US$390 for a PADI open-water course. They also lead snorkelling and sea-kayaking excursions, and rent out surf and boogie boards.

Eco tourism

Flora Tours Duarte, opposite Plaza Taina (Ⓣ240-5482, Ⓦwww.flora-tours.net). The very personable Nicolas offers a chance to get out into the countryside with a selection of knowledgeable half-day and full-day hikes from the moderate to the strenuous (15km). Comfortable in Spanish and French, he also speaks some English. Trips across the peninsula to go whale watching and visit Los Haitises can also be organized.

Horseriding

Rancho Isabela Unmarked road just off Carmen (Ⓣ847-4849). A superb outfit worth trying, though they only speak Spanish. The horses are in excellent condition and a pleasure to ride. In addition to short rides along the beach (RD$1000), they also organize day-trips (RD$2800), or multi-day adventures into the Cordillera Samaná beyond El Limón.

Quad-bike tours

Indrina Tours Duarte (Ⓣ240-6056, Ⓦwww.quad-lasterrenas.com). All-terrain half-day (U$100) and full-day (US$180–200) excursions into the countryside to visit local coffee plantations, waterfalls and beaches further afield (such as Playa Rincón). Costs given are for two people sharing a quad bike. The staff is mainly French-speaking and they also hire out quads for the day.

Watersports and mountain biking

Pura Vida (Ⓣ964-7051, Ⓦwww.puravidaplanet.com). French-owned adventure sport outfit with two offices in town, one in the centre next to *Paco Cabaña* and another at the eastern end at the *Palapa Hotel*. Their surf school operates out of *Hotel Acaya*. They specialize in kitesurfing and windsurfing off Playa Cosón (for beginners) and Playa Popy (experts only) but also offer mountain-bike excursions and rental. Windsurfing and kitesurfing rates are US$100/day for a 2 hour lesson, including equipment rental.

Eating and drinking

Thanks to the large expat community, Las Terrenas has an excellent variety of **restaurants**, from Spanish tapas, pizza and other Italian dishes, to gourmet French cuisine. Some of the best (and most romantic) are huddled together in the old **Fisherman's Village** – a row of refurbished beach shacks west of the main intersection, which are also the top spots for a sundowner. There are a few **supermarkets** south of the beach on the main road and on Calle Carmen –Supermercado Lindo is the largest and best stocked – as well as a very good French bakery, *La Boulangerie Française*, in Plaza Taina. To escape the tourist scene, wander around the Dominican barrio, where you'll also find cheap *comida típica* and several small shacks where locals hang out drinking rum.

Barrio Latino Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-6367. Simple, bustling café in the heart of the village with a large menu that takes in sandwiches, salads, burgers, pizzas and ice cream, but best of all are the breakfasts. Good for people watching, too.

La Boulangerie Française Plaza Taina. French bakery-cum-café. Just the place for a continental breakfast – dunk your croissants in your *café au lait* like the expat regulars. Alternatively, stock up on some goodies for a beach picnic.

La Capannina Av 27 Febrero Ⓣ886-2122. Decent Italian set under a thatched roof with a beach view, albeit across the road. Offers over twenty types of pizza (from RD$300) including a delicious special with salmon, bacon, caviar and rocket topping, as well as a few fancier offerings, such as lobster and octopus.

El Cayuco Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-6885. Serves a bevy of good seafood dishes including grilled shrimp in lime sauce and octopus carpaccio. Also a pretty hopping nightspot. Mains from around RD$350.

El Chiringuito Playa Las Ballenas near Playa Colibrí. This tiny beach bar offers cocktails, beer and fresh fruit juices right on the sand. Closed Tues.

Cuca Marina Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-6351. Seemingly rather simple at first glance – a Spartan-looking dining space with a menu chalked up daily on a blackboard – this is actually a very charming restaurant with good service and a range of fiery, competitively priced dishes (try the aptly named *pollo al Diablo* (for RD$420). Ask for a table at the back overlooking the water.

El Mambo Social Club Av 27 Febrero Ⓣ877-8374. One of the more successful top-end restaurants in Las Terrenas, *El Mambo* offers exquisite fine dining presided over by a former Michelin-starred chef (try the steak with gorgonzola or the creole crab in coconut milk), as well as a lounge bar with billiards, a card table and a good selection of whiskies. Dinner only.

El Mocambo Duarte at the corner with the Playa Bonita road. If dining at *Mi Corazón* is beyond your budget, enjoy the superb *pâtisserie* of the restaurant's Parisian pastry chef in this sophisticated tearoom-cum-shop, where you're surrounded by elegant wooden furniture and art work – all for sale.

Mi Corazón Duarte at the corner with the Playa Bonita road Ⓣ240-5329, Ⓦwww.micorazon.com. This Swiss-owned establishment is undoubtedly the town's most elegant restaurant, offering the classiest dining experience, set in a beautifully illuminated, upstairs colonial-style courtyard with an intimate bar area located on the balcony above. The menu changes frequently but expect creative dishes such as watercress ravioli with lobster, ricotta and nuts, followed by fish fillet with pineapple and ginger, Thai rice and sweet and sour vegetables. Starters for around RD$500, mains from RD$850. There's also a changing five-course set menu for RD$2500 (without wine). Dinner only. Check website for seasonal hours.

Pica Pollo Comedor La Parillada Duarte, opposite Western Union. A cut above the usual *Pica Pollo* franchise, this large open-sided terrace *comedor* pulls in Dominican and expat families alike, providing a superb buffet lunch – RD$100 for the *menú del día*, usually chicken, rice, beans and salad but with succulent beef fillet, kebabs, fresh fish and al-dente pasta for a little more. You can even take away an entire roast chicken for RD$250. Only coffee and bread available for breakfast. Closed Sun.

Pizza Coco Av 27 Febrero. Reasonably priced pizzeria (a margherita costs RD$170, *frutas del mar* RD$300) with a candlelit outdoor seating area. The best pizza in town, though the lemon herb chicken is also worth a try.

La Salsa Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-6805. Expensive but worthwhile seafood restaurant located on an outdoor beach patio at the western end of the refurbished row of old fishing shacks. Try the fish of the day *ceviche* (RD$350) or the *papillote de pescado* (RD$530). The place also has a new take away pizza window round the side. Closed Mon.

La Terrasse Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa Ⓣ240-6351. The smartest restaurant in the Fisherman's Village, this elegant French affair offers a handsome if cramped dining space – linen table cloths, ginger lilies in vases, waitresses in long white skirts – and top-notch, albeit pricey cooking. Booking recommended. Closed between lunch and dinner.

El Thalassa Calle de la Playa just before the *Alisei* hotel. Excellent new French restaurant offering fine dining at more affordable rates than some, drawing in tourists and expats alike. As the name suggests – Thalassa being a personification of the sea in Greek mythology – the restaurant specializes in seafood and the seafaring theme continues inside with the table decorations and a porthole into the kitchen. Count on around RD$500 for flambéd shrimp in pastis but leave room for the exquisite mango and passion fruit crumble (RD$250). Dinner only.

Nightlife

Las Terrenas has enough going on at night to keep the large numbers of independent travellers occupied through the early hours. The dancehalls typically don't get busy until late in the evening and the sex trade is relatively prominent in the discos, where you can expect to pay a cover. A festive **night market** takes place in the Dominican barrio directly south of the front centred particularly on Calle Carmen, locals sell food and booze from stalls, hang out along the road and play drums, from Friday to Sunday – a memorable Dominican experience.

Gaia Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa. The town's hottest spot, a three-storey Miami-style nightclub with plenty of glitz. The ground floor plays mainly merengue and bachata, the first techno and house and up on the open-air top-deck you get to chill with lounge music. Expect wild weekends: international DJs, dancing girls, fire-eaters and action throughout the night.

El Mosquito Art Bar Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa. Although popular with expats and foreign tourists, who like its arty vibe, this jumps with the best of them at weekends when it also attracts a fair number of locals. The bar makes a mean *piña colada*, also staging concerts and exhibitions of local paintings. From 6pm. Closed Mon.

Nuevo Mundo Principal. Very popular disco 200m south of the main intersection, sporting a dark, modern look and spinning a jarring mix of merengue and European dance music until the last person is left standing. From 10pm; closed Mon.

Paco Cabana Calle de la Playa, near El Paseo. This luxury open-air beach bar has loungers where you can relax with a cocktail watching the sunset as the oh-so-fashionable music wafts out from within. Not quite so glam in high season, when sweaty hordes turn up to dance on the sandy dancefloor. Wi-fi zone.

Syroz Bar Fisherman's Village, Calle de la Playa. A major local hangout, this small beach bar has a relaxed atmosphere and even better tropical drinks. The music – a mix of merengue, salsa, bachata, ambient and electronica – completes the scene, making this the most chilled place along the beach at night.

Listings

Banks All of the main banks have a presence in Las Terrenas: Progresso, El Paseo; Banco Popular, Principal; and Scotiabank in Plaza Rosada have ATM machines. Fort Knox, El Paseo (daily 8.30am–8.30pm; ⓣ240-6719), gives competitive rates and rents safe boxes.

Car, quad and scooter rental Plenty of choice, so it's worth shopping around: two good choices are Jessie Car Rental, calles Carmen and de la Playa (ⓣ240-6415, ⓔjessiecar5@hotmail.com), and Fun Rental, Calle Principal (ⓣ240-6784, ⓔfunrental@hotmail.com). Quads from around US$50 and cars US$60 per day.

Internet Mailboxes Etc, Duarte and Heladería Bruno, El Paseo, all provide reasonably fast access for around RD$30 per 30min.

Laundry Lavendería Tunet (Mon–Sat 8am–6pm, Sun 8am–3pm; ⓣ240-5018) in the Centro Colonial on Carmen charges around RD$150 a load, as does Lavandería Amy (Mon–Sat 8am–7pm; ⓣ624-0000) on Francisco Bono off the beach road. Most of the town's hotels offer a laundry service as well.

Medical There is a small 24hr clinic within El Paseo; the town hospital (ⓣ240-6474) is just south of the Centro Comercial.

Petrol The town's only petrol station is on Principal at the southern edge of town.

Pharmacy Súper Farmacia del Paseo (Mon–Sat 8am–8pm; ⓣ240-6497). Farmacia Principal, Calle Duarte (daily 8am–8pm; ⓣ240-6084).

Police The police station (ⓣ240-6022) is on Calle de la Playa just west of El Paseo.

Post office Head for the Maison de la Presse in El Paseo, which sells stamps and has a post box.

Telephone Codetel (Mon–Sat 8am–7pm; closed Sun) is located about 200m south of the main intersection.

Travel agents Bahía Tours, Casa Linda, Duarte (ⓣ240-6088, ⓦwww.bahia-tours.com), can help with flights (RD$300 for flight confirmation), excursions and hotel reservations.

Playa Bonita

Playa Bonita, 3km of uninterrupted beach that begins just west of Playa Las Ballenas, is a picturesque and tranquil strip of sand, backed by trimmed grass dotted with palm trees and an offshore reef that provides some of the best snorkelling on the peninsula. It's seen a fair bit of development over the past few years, but most of it has, thankfully, been discreet and tasteful with new hotels set well back from the seafront behind grassy lawns, increasing the number of places to stay and eat without detracting too much from the unspoilt character. Stay the night and the sunset will leave you reeling, as will the canopy of stars.

Things are slightly less idyllic just inland where the **Las Terrenas Country Club** (Ⓦwww.lasterrenascountryclub.com), a golf club with adjoining luxury condominiums, has been built over the past few years in stop-start fashion as funding for the scheme has come and gone. Just south of the golf club and standing in stark contrast to all the newly manufactured greenery, is a **thousand-year-old ceiba tree** (also known as a silk cotton tree), one of the largest and oldest documented trees on the island and an impressive gnarled giant.

Arrival and information

Entry to Playa Bonita begins at the *Coyomar* hotel, where a sandy track recently upgraded with paving bricks provides access for 4WDs and quad bikes past the front of the hotels and along a progressively empty beach (where people sometimes take advantage of the isolation to swim or sunbathe nude).

Accommodation

There are several prime **places to stay** on Playa Bonita, most pretty good value given their scenic location. Each has a decent restaurant attached and if you're looking for natural beauty, peace and quiet, you're far better off staying here than in Las Terrenas.

Playa Bonita

Casa Grande Ⓣ240-6349, Ⓦwww.casagrandebeachhotel.com. This excellent-value hotel has recently been refurbished with five good-size rooms in a large house set behind an expansive lawn. Together with the *Atlantis*, it serves the best food on Playa Bonita, with gourmet French meals available nightly at a very elegant restaurant at the front. ⑤

Coyamar Ⓣ240-5130, Ⓦwww.coyamar.com. Slightly less chic but still pleasant with ten smart and warmly decorated rooms (fan & hot water), each with private balcony or terrace facing the beach and use of the small pool set back from the waterfront amid cheerful tropical gardens. The casual bar-restaurant serves a mix of moderately priced creole and international dishes. Breakfast included. ⑤

Hotel Acaya Ⓣ240-6161, Ⓦwww.acaya-hotel.fr.com. The most elegant hotel on the strip, offering spacious tiled rooms simply but tastefully furnished in wood and bamboo, with louvered doors and windows yet with modern conveniences such as fridges, hair-dryers and wi-fi. Each has its own terrace or balcony; go for the second-floor rooms, which are cooler and have better views. It also boasts a fabulous thatched lounge-restaurant in the garden with sea views and delicious food (mains RD$350–700). The Pura Vida surf school is also based here. Breakfast included. ⑤

Hotel Atlantis Ⓣ240-6111, Ⓦwww.atlantis-hotel.com.do. A whimsical gleaming-white hotel, whose pretty rooms are palatial (the more expensive ones at least), though one or two need a little touching up in places. Try to book either the Jamaica or the El Paso room, both with panoramic views of the beach. Dining here is a must since the owner was the one-time chef of former French President François Mitterrand – at the very least try breakfast, as it's included in the price. ⑥

Hotel Costa Las Ballenas Ⓣ240-5155, Ⓦwww.costa-las-ballenas.com. A vast resort with a pleasant pool area and an abundance of nicely decorated individual cabañas, an apartment block and large villas, hidden amid an extensive, beautiful tropical garden. The cabañas are slowly being refurbished so make sure you get one that's already been done. The hotel is home to one of the best scuba outfits – Las Terrenas Divers (see box, p.150). ⑦

Playa Cosón

Two kilometres around the headland from Playa Bonita, **Playa Cosón** is home to a small fishing community and an even more deserted 5km stretch of soft sand. Development has begun to encroach even here though predominantly in the form of residential projects, many of which have stalled due to cash-flow difficulties. From Cosón the splendid beach continues west, uninterrupted for another 7km with no human outposts to speak of, before running smack into the Cordillera Samaná.

Arrival and information

The beach track ends at *Hotel Atlantis* though it is possible to walk and scramble 2km around the headland on an intermittent and indistinct path to **Playa Cosón**. However, it's easier to **drive** directly to Playa Cosón via the same road that leads from Las Terrenas to Playa Bonita – head up Calle Duarte and take the marked turn-off to the right just past *La Esquina* bar – forking left after a couple of kilometres; just follow the signs marked *Casa Cosón*. The Playa Bonita road is a journey suitable only for a 4WD, quad bike or *motoconcho*. A **taxi** to the beaches costs US$15, *motoconcho* RD$120.

Accommodation

Set apart from the encroaching condominium construction at the back of the beach, are two excellent hotels.

Casa Cosón ☎ 853-8470, Ⓦ www.casacoson.com. A gorgeous hotel comprising four rooms with sea view, three garden suites and three exquisitely and distinctively crafted villas with a large lawn stretching down to even vaster expanses of beach. Breakfast is included and dinner is a changing US$42 set menu. ⑥

The Peninsula House ☎ 962-7447, Ⓦ www.thepeninsulahouse.com. In a class of its own, this Victorian-style mock plantation house was voted the world's best hotel by readers in Conde Naste in 2009 and it doesn't disappoint: transporting you to a different era, the house is chock-full of antiques, original art and period furniture with a billiard room, library, and a glorious swimming pool overlooking the grounds and the ocean. Guests in the handful of sumptuously decorated suites are thoroughly pampered by an army of staff dressed in white linen. During the day, guests can decamp to the hotel beach house and matching colonial-style *Beach Restaurant* (see below).

Eating and drinking

As well as a handful of informal beach shacks on the sand, serving grilled, fresh-caught fish for a few pesos, you can enjoy refined yet relaxed dining at the superb *Beach Restaurant* (lunch only, closed Mon; ☎ 962-7447). Sheltered amid the coconut palms, this plantation-style restaurant, which belongs to the luxurious *Peninsula House* hotel, offers a changing, creative menu of seafood-dominated dishes. Go for the catch of the day but make sure you leave room for the exquisite desserts or home-made ice cream. Then enjoy a siesta in the hammock.

El Limón

Little more than an intersection with a few houses on either side, dusty **EL LIMÓN** – some 14km southeast of Las Terrenas – seems unpromising at first, but it makes an ideal base for excursions to the magnificent waterfall **El Salto de Limón** to the south. The waterfall can actually be visited from one of several hamlets along the Samaná–Las Terrenas road.

Also within striking distance – some 3km from El Limón – are sibling beaches **Playa El Limón** and **Playa Morón**. *Santi Rancho* (see below) leads horseriding excursions to the beaches, but it's also possible to walk from the village, setting off on the small path just east of the main crossroads. Playa El Limón comes first, a beautiful, abandoned beach from which it's another 1km east along the shore to Playa Morón – even better and surrounded by rocks, with a large mountain cave on its eastern end into which the waves crash, safe to clamber around in at low tide.

Visiting El Salto de Limón

If you want to avoid the tour-bus crowds, arrange an early morning or late afternoon visit from El Limón. The 52m waterfall is accessible by **horse** from any of the operators below (as well as several outfits in Las Terrenas) and takes roughly three hours round-trip. You can also **walk** but that‘s only advisable when it‘s very dry. The path cuts across a broad river before climbing into the palm-thick mountains. As the waterfall comes into sight, the horses are tethered at a small way-station where you can have a drink before making the steep descent to the fall. The walk is well worth the effort to see the torrent of whitewater dropping precipitously off a sheer cliff in the middle of the wilderness forming a natural pool at its base, where you can **swim**. You need to be in decent shape and well shod, especially after a lot of rain when the boggy route can be treacherous. You‘ll also need to wear long trousers for the ride.

The local community-based **ecotourism association** now has its own excellent website (Ⓦwww.saltolimon.com), which gives details in English, including phone numbers, of the dozen legitimate operators in the area and where they're located. However, **tour quality** and the rates charged do vary among the providers, as does what is included. Whether you come on a tour bus, or as an independent traveller, you should establish beforehand whether the price covers: transport to the *parada* (in the case of an organized tour); the park entry fee (RD$50); drinks and/or a meal, generally a combination of chicken, rice, fried plantain and a smidgen of salad; and the guide – who walks alongside you and informs you about the surrounding countryside, probably in Spanish. If the guide's tip is not included, find out from the operator (again before you sign up) what the norm is.

The pick of the bunch, and so preferred by a lot of the larger **tour operators**, is the combined ranch-restaurant *Santi Rancho*, just south of the intersection on the road to Samaná (see p.156). Their waterfall trip currently costs RD$750 per person, which includes the horse, guide and park fee and they now also offer canyoning down Río El Limón.

Also highly recommended is *Parada La Manzana* (Ⓣ916-0892, Ⓔantoniadelanuez@yahoo.es), located a few kilometres south of El Limón and run by Antonia and Martín, who, in addition to organizing a good trip, also prepare an excellent traditional lunch. Consider also *Parada Ramona and Basilio* (Ⓣ956-5526), where you can also learn about their home-grown cocoa.

Practicalities

Getting to El Limón under your own steam is fairly easy since every 15min or so during daylight hours **guaguas**, usually pick-up trucks, shuttle between Las Terrenas and El Limón, and El Limón and Samaná (both 45min; RD$60).

Upon arrival you'll be beset by several local *buscones* trying to steer you to one of the excursion outfits. Since several **scams** and various sub-standard operators exist, it's extremely important that you only sign up to go with a member of the local ecotourism association (see p.155) and it's best to book in advance. They all run *paradas* – small roadside restaurant-cum-tour offices dotted among several hamlets in the locality.

If you fancy **staying the night** in El Limón, *Santi Rancho*, just south of the intersection on the road to Samaná (Ⓣ342-0776, Ⓦwww.cascadalimon.com; ②), runs a highly recommended trip to the waterfall (see p.155) and has four simple but clean cabañas, with fan and mosquito net. **Lunch** at their restaurant (RD$300–500) is excellent quality – though prices have risen as its popularity has increased – and offers greater variety than at most places, with goat, guinea fowl, fish in coconut milk and octopus featuring on the menu as well as the ubiquitous chicken, rice, beans and plantain.

The coast to Cabrera

The coastal stretch just west of the Samaná Peninsula holds a series of excellent beaches, most of them surprisingly untouched by tourism. Here the road skirts the coast just a few metres from the sea in places, surrounded by forests of palm trees. There are two sizeable towns at either end of this strip, **Nagua** and **Cabrera**, the latter a focus of French Canadian tourism and the more diverting destination: just south of town are a waterfall, an eerie twilight meeting spot for thousands of egrets and a working coffee farm. Between the two, consider stopping at **Playa La Entrada**, a little-used strand of beach with the ruins of an abandoned village on its far end, and **Playa Diamante**, a turquoise inlet with views of the pounding surf just beyond its sheltering coral reef. More intriguing still is **Lago Dudú**, actually two freshwater lagoons favoured by divers, that makes for a popular local swimming spot.

Nagua

Below sea level and often stiflingly hot, **NAGUA** was once known as a bit of a political hotspot due to frequent labour strikes; it's peaceful enough these days although the workforce will never be slow to down tools if the need arises. Perhaps not surprisingly, few visitors stop in this industrial town, with its cement factory and federal penitentiary (the country's largest) providing a not-so-scenic backdrop. There's little to detain in any case, the lone "sight" being the statue of **María Trinidad Sánchez** – who designed and sewed the first Dominican flag – in the Parque Central. The waterfront, north of the park, is fairly sedate, save for the annual **fiestas patronales**, January 14 to 21, in honour of the Virgin of Altagracia.

However, if you're travelling between any of the north-coast towns and the Samaná Peninsula you are likely to need to **change guaguas** here. Leaving from different points in the town are frequent services to Río San Juan via Cabrera (1hr), San Francisco de Macorís (1hr 40min) and Sánchez (50min). For a comfier and slightly quicker ride, Caribe Tours buses pass through San Francisco on their way to and from Santo Domingo (9 daily). The office (☎584-4505) is on Av 27 de Febrero.

An excellent road extends from Nagua inland to San Francisco de Macorís and the Cibao Valley, quite scenic as it winds through the far end of the palm-covered Cordillera Septentrional, before plunging into some of the most verdant farmland in the world. Along the way you'll pass coffee, rice and cocoa farms, plus a number of small pueblos that see virtually no tourist traffic.

North to Cabrera

Fifteen kilometres north of the Río Boba's mouth is **Playa La Entrada**, with a small, sparsely populated town of the same name perched at its northern end. From the entrance, at the corner of the C-5 and Calle Príncipe, roam 250m down to get to the picturesque mouth of the Río La Entrada. Just beyond you'll see a beautiful, rocky island in the water, though don't try and swim out to it – the water here is known for its rip tides. From the mouth of the river, there's over 5km of sandy beach in each direction; indeed, the beach here continues eastward, uninterrupted until Nagua. Walking the full length of the beach makes for a worthwhile but exhausting day.

Continuing north, the rip tide-laden waters are safe only for exceptionally strong swimmers until you reach **Playa Diamante**, 3km beyond La Entrada. You can get to it via the dirt road off the C-5, which starts next to the *Diamante* restaurant. Playa Diamante consists of a placid, blue beach cove set off from the ocean by a rock outcrop at its mouth. Several hotel chains are elbowing each other for permission to develop the site, but nothing has disturbed the surf yet.

Between the two beaches, a sign on your left-hand side marks the entrance to **Lago Dudú** and **Agua Azul**, two enchanting freshwater lakes, set in atmospheric caves with stalactites and lush overhanging foliage. When the sun is out the effect is truly magical; the brilliant, transparent blue water allows visibility of around 50m, making the place a major attraction for divers, who can explore the underwater tunnel that links the two caverns. The warm fish-filled spring water and Tarzan ropes that have been fixed up make it a popular place for swimming in at weekends. A small **entry fee** is charged as the lagoons are on private property.

Cabrera

CABRERA, 5km north of Playa Diamante, is the most visibly prosperous outpost along this part of the coastline – clean, uncongested and dotted with a number of attractive, pastel-coloured homes – but there's still precious little to it. Its city beach, **Playa Clara** at the north end of town, isn't bad, though it's no competition for Playa Diamante and Playa El Bretón, each within easy striking distance.

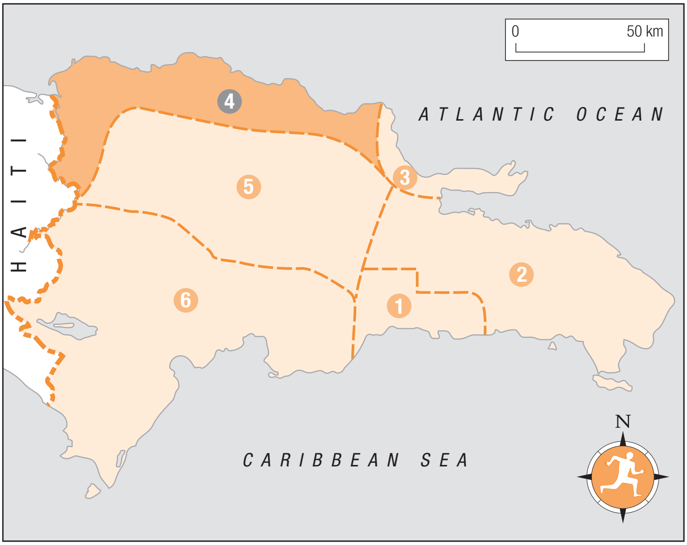
Better is the large **waterfall** just west of town, hidden off an unmarked dirt road across the C-5; the pool at its base is swimmable when the water level is high enough. Further into the mountains, a large tree 3km west of *La Catalina Hotel* (see below) down a dirt road, serves as the nightly roosting site for thousands of **African egrets** that populate Dominican pastures. The birds arrive every night around 6pm without fail. Once the convocation is complete, the massive tree – identifiable by the enormous sheet of rock-hard guano that surrounds it – is abuzz with frenetic white motion and noise.

Practicalities

Cabrera itself doesn't offer too much on the accommodation front, just a few, very basic, in-town budget options. Better to head just out of town, about 3km west to a small pueblo and then south up a dirt road to the highly recommended *La Catalina* (ⓣ589-7700, ⓦwww.lacatalina.com; ⑥), a large country inn perched atop a steep cliff that overlooks Cabrera and the sea. Accommodation comprises a mix of air-conditioned hotel rooms and fan-ventilated one- or two-bedroom apartments. The place also boasts two swimming pools and an outdoor patio dining room, which serves excellent, pricey French cuisine (reservations necessary), though breakfast is included for hotel guests. Local tours, including horseriding or hiking excursions as well as golf or surfing can all be arranged. Outside of eating at *La Catalina*, you may wish to try the pizzas at *Pizza El Dorado* in town.

4

The Silver Coast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CHAPTER 4 Highlights

- **La Isabela de Torres Cable Car, Puerto Plata** There's no better way to view the north coast than from the summit of La Isabela de Torres – and no easier way to get there than on the Puerto Plata cable car. See p.172

- **Damajagua waterfalls** Climb, slide and swim your way past, through and over 27 waterfalls tumbling down a mountainous stretch of the Río Damajagua. See p.178

- **Kiteboarding/windsurfing, Cabarete** With warm water, near-perfect conditions and a huge choice of tuition and equipment, it's no wonder surfers and riders flock here from around the world. See p.186

- **Mountain biking in the Cordillera Septentrional** A fabulous way to get deep into the countryside, with plenty of trails to suit riders of any ability. See p.189

- **Blue Moon Retreat** Exquisite Indian food served on banana leaves in a tranquil mountaintop haven in the Cordillera Septentrional. See p.193

- **Snorkelling near La Isabela/Monte Cristi** Pristine coral, clear water and no crowds make this area off the north coast the best snorkelling spot on the island. See p.199

▲ View from La Isabela de Torres

4

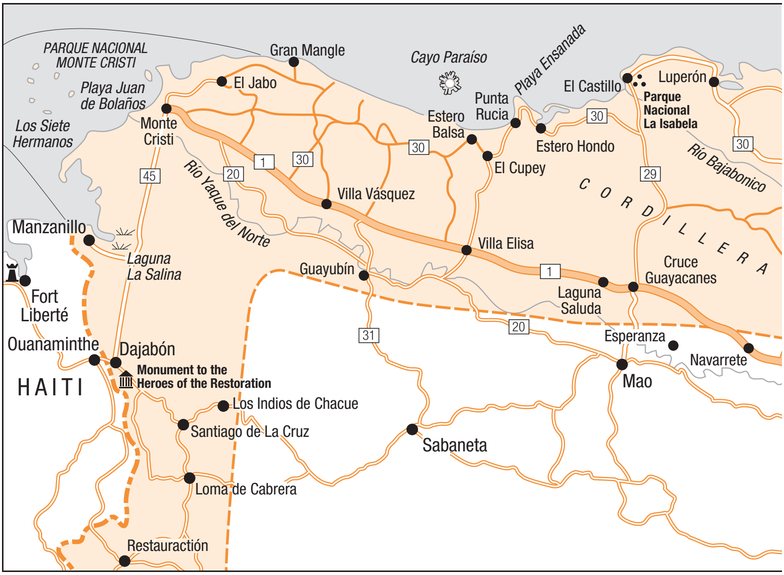
The Silver Coast

The Dominican Republic's so-called **Silver Coast**, 300km of mostly prime waterfront property on the country's northern edge, hemmed in to the south by the **Cordillera Septentrional** mountain range, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Caribbean. With a seemingly unending supply of great beaches, such a designation is no surprise, though away from the heavy traffic of the resort towns – mostly around Puerto Plata and parts east – you may be surprised by the coast's unspoilt character and the diversity of its geography. The place has historical resonance as well, as the first shore that Columbus settled, though the Spanish colony later grew up around Santo Domingo on the island's south coast.

Columbus envisioned the area as a shipping point for vast deposits of gold that proved to be a product of his imagination; popular belief is that the sobriquet originated a few decades later when armadas bearing Mexican silver skirted the fortified shore to protect themselves from the pirates of the old Cannibal Sea. The word "cannibal" is a corruption of "Caribbean", after the Caribe Indians, who were reported practitioners of cannibalism. Indeed, sixteenth-century maps of the region invariably bore illustrations portraying natives roasting missionaries on spits.

A century after Columbus's "discovery", Cuba supplanted the north coast of the Dominican Republic as the favoured way-station for Spanish booty plundered from Mexico and Peru. The region soon after began to rely on contraband trade with the very pirates it once fought, and the major settlements were razed to the ground by the Spanish Crown in 1605 as a punishment. The Silver Coast's last four centuries have proceeded much as the first did, with periods of short-lived prosperity followed by long decades of subsistence. You'll see evidence of the occasional construction booms embedded in the major towns like geological strata.

Nowhere is this better seen than in **Puerto Plata**, a bustling, albeit slightly down at heel, city packed with atmospheric nineteenth-century architecture situated roughly halfway between the Samaná Peninsula and the Haitian border. Though it's an interesting place to explore, most visitors tend to bypass it entirely in favour of the calmer, more upmarket and more neatly manicured pleasures of **Playa Dorada** to the east, the largest all-inclusive resort complex in the world, and, as such, home to a dizzying array of organized activities. Further east are more resort towns, linked by the coastal Carretera 5. Chief among them are **Sosúa**, a former sex-tourism centre that has (partly) cleaned up its image over recent years, with three separate beaches and an old Jewish quarter founded by World War II refugees, and **Cabarete**, the kiteboarding and windsurfing capital of the Americas, an internationally flavoured village erected over cattle pasture during the past twenty years. Even further east, things quieten down with no huge developments until you reach the Samaná Peninsula, although there are some interesting diversions along the way.


PARQUE NACIONAL MONTE CRISTI
Gran Mangle
Cayo Paraíso
Playa Ensanada
El Castillo
Luperón
Parque Nacional La Isabela
Playa Juan de Bolaños
El Jabo
Punta Rucia
Estero Balsa
Los Siete Hermanos
Monte Cristi
30
Estero Hondo
30
30
Río Bajabonico
45
1
30
20
El Cupey
29
Río Yaque del Norte
Villa Vásquez
CORDILLERA
Manzanillo
Villa Elisa
Laguna La Salina
Guayubín
1
Cruce Guayacanes
Fort Liberté
Laguna Saluda
20
31
Ouanaminthe
Dajabón
Esperanza
Navarrete
HAITI
Monument to the Heroes of the Restoration
Mao
Los Indios de Chacue
Santiago de La Cruz
Sabaneta
Loma de Cabrera
Restauractión

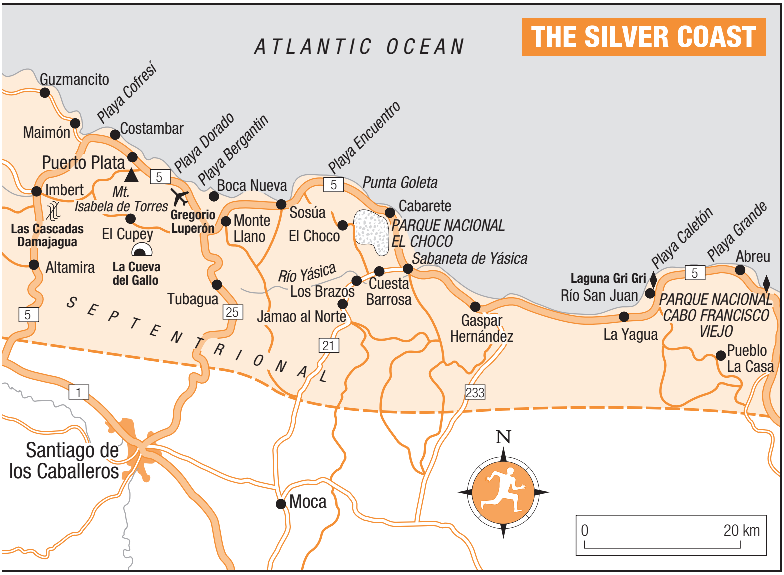
The best of these is sleepy **Río San Juan**, a small town bordered by the thick mangrove swamps of **Laguna Gri-Gri** and a glorious 2km-long beach known as **Playa Grande**.

Just outside Puerto Plata, to the west, the villages of Costambar and Cofresí provide two low-key alternatives to Playa Dorada; the former is a small beachside settlement dominated by expat residences and Dominican holiday homes, the latter a former fishing village hosting a couple of resort complexes. Further west lie a series of remote pueblos where *campesinos* live in much the same way as they have for the last five centuries. Of interest here are **La Isabela** and **El Castillo**, the site of Columbus's first permanent settlement, which sit behind an immaculate bay with the best snorkelling on the island; the remote beaches **Playa Ensenada** and **Punta Rucia**, as beautiful as any on the island; and at the far western end **Monte Cristi**, a remote, dusty border town flanked on both sides by a national park that protects a river delta, a collection of desert islands and a strip of cactus-laden mountain landscape.

South of Monte Cristi, most traffic heads for **Dajabón**, a trading post with an edgy frontier feel, which comes alive twice a week with a bustling market. From there a magnificent road corkscrews up into the Cordillera affording stellar views across the border into Haiti and along the northern Dominican coastal plain.

The C-5 makes **getting around** by car easy east of Puerto Plata as there are plenty of guaguas and *públicos* shuttling between Puerto Plata and Río San Juan, with onward connections to the Samaná Peninsula. The country's major bus company, Caribe Tours, also links the region with the capital providing bus services from Santo Domingo to Sosúa via Puerto Plata and Santiago.

Travelling west of Puerto Plata is more of a challenge (but not impossible) if you don't have a 4WD. From the **Carretera Puerto Plata**, which heads south towards Santiago, you'll find a number of turn offs that lead successively to Guzmancito, Luperón, La Isabela and Punta Rucia, hellish pot-holed moonscapes for the most part, but slowly in the process of being paved. Guaguas run along each of these roads during the day. Beyond Punta Rucia are mule tracks; if you don't have a


THE SILVER COAST
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Guzmancito
Playa Cofresí
Maimón
Costambar
Puerto Plata
Playa Dorado
Playa Bergantin
Mt. Isabela de Torres
Imbert
Gregorio Luperón
Boca Nueva
Playa Encuentro
Punta Goleta
Sosúa
Cabarete
Monte Llano
El Choco
PARQUE NACIONAL EL CHOCO
Las Cascadas Damajagua
El Cupey
Sabaneta de Yásica
Altamira
La Cueva del Gallo
Río Yásica
Cuesta Barrosa
Los Brazos
Tubagua
Jamao al Norte
SEPTENTRIONAL
Gaspar Hernández
Laguna Gri Gri
Río San Juan
La Yagua
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233

motorcycle, you'll have to head south to the Carretera Duarte, which stretches along the western Cibao Valley, to reach Monte Cristi. From there, a surprisingly good tarred road sweeps up into the mountains as far as Restauración, 60km due south. After that, you'll need a 4WD as the road beyond is of variable quality and devoid of public transport.

Puerto Plata and Playa Dorada

PUERTO PLATA, the north coast's largest city, and its resort extension **PLAYA DORADA** are very different places. Playa Dorada is a walled-off vacation factory filled with immaculately tended all-inclusive resorts which between them host over half a million tourists a year, while Puerto Plata is a bustling, industrial city that often struggles to convince visitors of its merits. Indeed, Playa Dorada's success has contributed to the relative demise of the city's own tourist industry. Puerto Plata's tumbledown streets and seedy bars have long struggled to compete with the airbrushed, air-conditioned charms of the all-inclusive hotels, but it always used to welcome its fair share of independent travellers. However, the combination of some rather ham-fisted attempts to improve the city's tourist infrastructure – notably at the Long Beach area – and the ever growing facilities of the

Puerto Plata expats

The worst questions you can ask an expat in Puerto Plata are often “Where are you from?” and “Why did you move here?” Milling among the tour operators, itinerant sailors, timeshare salesmen and retirees are a number of questionable characters, colourful in the extreme, many on the run from the law for tax evasion, insurance fraud and various other white-collar offences. The Caribbean adjuster for Lloyd’s of London claims that at any given time you’ll find some of Interpol’s most-wanted wandering the streets, and a British crew filming a documentary on English expats said that every time they turned on the camera inside one popular watering-hole, a half-dozen people ran for cover. The fugitives tend to attract a bewildering variety of law enforcement officials, including undercover FBI agents, Canadian Mounted Police, international spies and insurance detectives. It lends an eerie film-noir feel to the town, augmented by the narrow streets lined with slowly decaying nineteenth-century warehouses.

neighbouring resorts has meant there have been fewer and fewer reasons for tourists to visit the town. This loss of revenue has translated into a slight air of desperation, and you can pretty much guarantee that your arrival will attract the attention of numerous touts trying to (quite vehemently) steer you in the direction of their services, be it a hotel, a guided tour or a visit to a cigar-making workshop. You’ll need to be firm with your refusals.

You’ll find much about Puerto Plata to enjoy, particularly its nightlife. Its core, the **Old City**, or **Zona Colonial**, borders the port to the east, a narrow grid of streets that was once the most stylish neighbourhood in the country. Around the original town sprawls a patchwork maze of industrial zones and concrete barrios known as the **New City**, formed over the past century with the growth of the town’s main industries apart from tourism, namely tobacco, sugar and rum. More relaxing than either the city or Playa Dorada is **Costambar**, a quiet gated maze of townhouses and condos just a short RD$50 *motoconcho* or taxi ride away from the Parque Central while a little further west you’ll find the huge and much-advertised **Ocean World**, an aquamarine park home to dolphins, seals, sharks and more, whose new marina is one of the largest in the Caribbean and a major stop on the cruise-ship circuit.

The city’s **Fortaleza San Felipe** is the only impressive vestige of colonial times in one of the oldest European settlements of the New World. More prominent, if not quite as atmospheric, are the scores of often rather dilapidated Victorian **gingerbread mansions** that make an outdoor museum of the Old City. Along the Atlantic Ocean is its famous **Malecón**, a 2km promenade best experienced on a weekend evening when its discos, outdoor bars and bonfire beach parties spring to life. Other sights of interest include the **Museo de Ámbar**, with an impressive display of prehistoric insects trapped in the translucent sap, and the cable-car ride to the summit of **Mount Isabela de Torres**, the flat-topped behemoth that lords over the city from the south.

Some history

Christopher Columbus sailed past the city’s harbour on his 1492 voyage and gave the Silver Port the longer name of Puerto Plata de San Felipe, not, according to one legend, because of any metallurgical associations but because the waters took on a silvery hue at sunset. The settlement established here in 1502 by colonial governor Nicolás de Ovando for a time served as a resupply point for armadas bearing silver from Mexico to Spain. As the sixteenth century wore on, though, it was bypassed by the main routes due to increasing piracy and the importance of Havana further west, forcing it to survive on illegal trade until the Spanish-controlled government in Santo Domingo destroyed all settlements along the north coast, forcibly deporting residents of Puerto Plata to Monte Plata just east of the capital.

Puerto Plata was effectively abandoned to pirates until 1737, when the site was repopulated with Canary Islanders to prevent French encroachment on the island. However, it stayed a backwater until 1751, when entrepreneurs from the capital rebuilt the port and began exporting mahogany and other precious woods. A century later during the **War of Restoration** of 1864–65, Puerto Plata was once again virtually demolished by nationalist guerrillas intent on driving out the occupying Spaniards. Quickly reconstructed, the city became the main shipping point for Cibao tobacco in the 1870s.

The **tobacco boom** was Puerto Plata's golden age, when for a few decades it was the wealthiest, most cosmopolitan town in the Caribbean. The burgeoning merchant class – many of them German exporters – built dozens of fabulous mansions, some of which remain to this day. By the beginning of the twentieth century, though, the United States took control of Dominican customs receipts and awarded themselves preferential trade status. Puerto Plata's German market shrunk and American barriers to tobacco sank the economy. In 1910 skyrocketing sugar prices resuscitated the port. Over the course of the following decade – a boom era dubbed the **Dance of Millions** (*Danza de los Millones*) – Puerto Plata took on more of a modern urban air with dozens of new factories and a population explosion, snuffed out a few years later as America's Great Depression took its toll. Dictator Trujillo did little to revive the town's stagnant economy over his thirty-year rule, instead centring his industrialization programme on the capital.

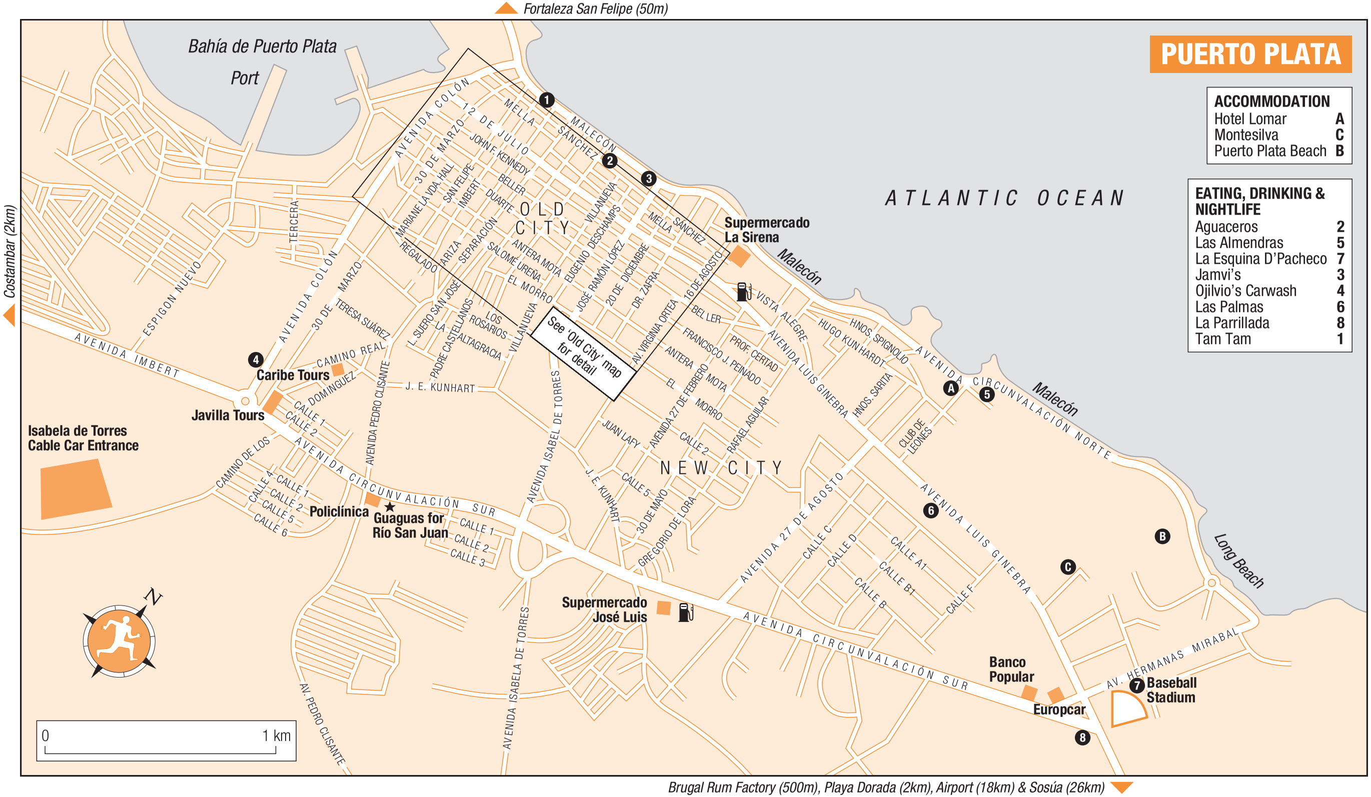
In the 1960s, another mini sugar-boom led the government to revive the decrepit port, attracting tens of thousands of additional rural immigrants. A decade later, Puerto Plata was insulated from fluctuating crop prices by the creation of **Playa Dorada**. The resort complex has attracted millions of tourists and provided thousands of jobs, but the self-sustaining, walled-off nature of the place has prevented its success from rubbing off on the city. It remains to be seen what impact the new US$27 million cruise-ship terminal and shopping plaza currently under construction will have on the city.

Arrival

Aeropuerto Gregorio Luperón (☎291-0000), 18km east of Puerto Plata, is the main northern entry point into the country. In addition to the numerous international **flights** feeding the resorts, Dominican Shuttles (☎738-3014, Ⓦwww.dominicanshuttles.com) operate an internal service from Punta Cana twice a week.

There is a Banco de Reservas **ATM** and **currency exchange** (Mon–Fri 9am–4pm) within the strip of shops lining the front of the airport, alongside a number of **car rental** offices, which have a better selection of vehicles than you'll find in the city (see p.177). Although most of the expensive hotels have shuttle buses waiting for their clients, *motoconchos* can also take you into town for RD$200, and there are plenty of taxis heading to points further out (US$40 to the city; US$20 to Sosúa). Just outside the entrance to the airport is the main coastal road, Carretera 5 (C-5), stretching from Puerto Plata all the way to Samaná. From the C-5 you can catch a guagua going in either direction; a trip to Puerto Plata or Sosúa should cost around RD$50.

If coming **by car** from Santiago you'll arrive via either the well-maintained and relatively flat C-5 or the C-25 (also known as the Carretera Turística), which, though it may look shorter on the map, is a narrow, twisty, mountain road, probably best avoided. At Puerto Plata the C-5 becomes the extremely congested Avenida Circunvalación Sur, marking the city's southern border.



PUERTO PLATA

ACCOMMODATION	
Hotel Lomar	A
Montesilva	C
Puerto Plata Beach	B

EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE	
Aguaceros	2
Las Almendras	5
La Esquina D'Pacheco	7
Jamvi's	3
Ojilvio's Carwash	4
Las Palmas	6
La Parrillada	8
Tam Tam	1

Fortaleza San Felipe (50m)
Costambar (2km)
Brugal Rum Factory (500m), Playa Dorada (2km), Airport (18km) & Sosúa (26km)
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Bahía de Puerto Plata
Port
Malecón
Malecón
Long Beach
OLD CITY
NEW CITY
See 'Old City' map for detail
Supermercado La Sirena
Supermercado José Luis
Caribe Tours
Javilla Tours
Isabela de Torres Cable Car Entrance
Policlínica
Guaguas for Río San Juan
Banco Popular
Europcar
Baseball Stadium
MALECÓN
AVENIDA COLÓN
12 DE JULIO
MELLA
SÁNCHEZ
JOHN F. KENNEDY
BELLER
DUARTE
IMBERT
SAN FELIPE
30 DE MARZO
MARIANE LA VDA HALL
REGALADO
ARIZA
SEPARACIÓN
SALOMÉ UREÑA
ANTERA MOTA
EL MORRO
EUGENIO DESCHAMPS
VILLANUEVA
JOSÉ RAMÓN LÓPEZ
20 DE DICIEMBRE
DR. ZAFRA
16 DE AGOSTO
AV. VIRGINIA ORTEA
BEL LER
VISTA ALEGRE
PROF. CERTAD
FRANCISCO J. PEINADO
ANTERA MOTA
EL MORRO
AVENIDA 27 DE FEBRERO
RAFAEL AGUILAR
CALLE 2
JUAN LAFY
CALLE 5
J. E. KUNHART
30 DE MAYO
GREGORIO DE LORA
AVENIDA LUIS GINEBRA
HUGO KUNHARDT
HNOS. SPIGNOLIO
HNOS. SARITA
CLUB DE LEONES
AVENIDA CIRCUNVALACIÓN NORTE
AVENIDA 27 DE AGOSTO
CALLE C
CALLE D
CALLE A1
CALLE B1
CALLE B
CALLE F
AVENIDA LUIS GINEBRA
AV. HERMANAS MIRABAL
AVENIDA CIRCUNVALACIÓN SUR
AVENIDA ISABEL DE TORRES
AVENIDA ISABELA DE TORRES
CALLE 1
CALLE 2
CALLE 3
AVENIDA PEDRO CLISANTE
AV. PEDRO CLISANTE
J. E. KUNHART
LOS ROSARIOS
LA ALTAGRACIA
PADRE CASTELLANOS
L. SUERO SAN JOSÉ
VILLANUEVA
TERESA SUÁREZ
30 DE MARZO
CAMINO REAL
DOMINGUEZ
CALLE 1
CALLE 2
AVENIDA COLÓN
TERCERA
ESPIGON NUEVO
AVENIDA IMBERT
CAMINO DE LOS
CALLE 4
CALLE 1
CALLE 2
CALLE 5
CALLE 6
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Arriving **by bus** is another option; the city is a major junction for Caribe Tours and Metro, whose vehicles arrive from Santo Domingo (daily, seven; 4hr; RD$320) via Santiago (1hr; RD$140). The terminal for Caribe Tours (Ⓦwww.caribetours.com.do) is on Camino Real at the junction with Eugenio Kunhardt whereas Metro's terminal (Ⓣ586-6062, Ⓦwww.metroserviciosturisticos.com) is in the Old City on the corner of Beller and 16 de Agosto. Another transport option is Javilla Tours, located just off Avenida Circunvalación Sur at 30 de Marzo. They provide a regular guagua service to Santiago (1hr 30min; RD$100) via Imbert and Altamira, so are useful for reaching the Damagagua Falls (see p.178). The **guaguas** that travel the length of the coast all end up at the Parque Central, from where you can pick up a taxi or *motoconcho* if your hotel isn't within walking distance.

If you're headed for the Samaná Peninsula contact Transporte Papagayo (Ⓣ749-6415). They run a daily bus service from Puerto Plata (4hr; RD$250); leaving at around 6.30am, they will pick you up at your hotel. If you're coming to Puerto Plata, the bus leaves Samaná at around 2pm. Again, you can arrange a hotel pick-up.

Information

Despite the insistent entreaties of the local "guides", who will likely pounce on you as you arrive, it is not recommended that you use them to orient yourself or find accommodation. The government **tourist office** (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm), on Calle José Carmen Ariza 45, just off the main square, is understocked and understaffed though they can provide you with a map and the odd brochure; unless you're staying in a resort, the best sources of information are probably *Sam's Bar and Grill* (see p.175), which has a noticeboard and a high volume of visitor traffic, and The Meeting Place (Ⓦwww.meetingplacepuertoplata.com) two blocks from the park on J. F. Kennedy, which runs an English-language bookshop and resource centre for expat travellers. Puerto Plata also boasts a weekly rag, *El Faro* (Ⓦwww.periodicoelfaro.com.do), which offers some listings; other information can be obtained from Ⓦwww.popreport.com. **Plaza Dorada**, a shopping plaza at the centre of the complex, houses banks, car rental and the like.

City transport

Central Puerto Plata is compact enough to make **walking** your best option. If heading to Playa Dorada, Costambar or Ocean World, you may want to take one of the ubiquitous *motoconchos*, which should cost RD$50. Cheaper but far slower are the **public buses** shuttling between Playa Dorada and the Parque Central. The price is RD$10, but it can take up to 45min to get from one side of town to the other. **Taxis** are relatively expensive (US$15 to Playa Dorada), but are the fastest mode of transport and far safer than *motoconchos*. It's best to pick them up at one of their main gathering points: Parque Central, Long Beach, the traffic circle at Circunvalación Sur and Colón, or the entrances to Playa Dorada and Costambar. The taxis don't have **meters** though the tourist office has the set fares – settle on a fare before you get in, and don't be afraid to bargain. To call ahead for a pick-up, try Caribe (Ⓣ586-4730) or Central (Ⓣ586-7498). If shuttling back and forth from Costambar or Playa Dorada, **renting a car** can spare you the hassles of public transport. You're best off renting at the airport or at Playa Dorado as the rental outlets along the eastern end of the Circunvalación Sur are just as expensive and tend to have fewer vehicles.

Accommodation

It's advisable to book your hotel before arrival if possible. The best luxury **hotels** are east of town within Playa Dorada, but these are of course **all-inclusives**, which limit your freedom a bit. Besides, as most are aimed squarely at the mass market, they may not always live up to the "luxury" or self-appointed "five-star" billing. Most of the handful of downtown options are at the **budget** end of things and none too plush, but handy for nightlife.

Other possibilities are Cofresí, which offers a couple of resorts and a few villas, and **Costambar** (see p.174), which predominantly provides condominiums. For the latter, if you haven't booked in advance online, the best way to find an apartment is to drive or walk around, peeking in the various places with "For Rent" signs out front. Rates are often advertised in pesos, but you can also pay in US dollars and are increasingly negotiable in low season. Alternatively, try a totally different experience at the *Tubagua Plantation Village* eco-lodge set in the lofty folds of the Cordillera Septentrional (see opposite).

Puerto Plata

The following places are shown on the map on p.166.

Hotel Lomar Malecón, just west of Puerto Plata beach ☎320-8555. Rooms are spacious and clean, with cable TV, a/c, mini-fridges and plenty of hot water, but many of the furnishings and fitments are looking distinctly careworn and a firm managerial hand is lacking. Good ocean views in some rooms since it's a stone's throw from the beach. ④

Montesilva La Estancia ☎320-0205. Clean, simple and safe on a quiet backstreet, the *Montesilva* is one of Puerto Plata's cheerier budget offerings with twelve rooms, all with cable TV and a/c, and a small swimming pool. ③

Victoriano San Felipe 33 ☎586-9752. Reasonable budget option in a nineteenth-century building with clean and functional though dark rooms, with cable TV and a/c but little hot water. Rooms with fan only are much cheaper. It can be very noisy at night. ③

Playa Dorada

Barcelo Puerto Plata ☎320-5020, Ⓦwww.barcelo.com. With the beach in front and the golf course behind, the *Barcelo* provides a perfect distillation of the Playa Dorada experience: blandly comfortable rooms with terrace/balcony, a handful of restaurants – both buffet and à la carte – plentiful sports facilities, including two swimming pools, tennis courts, golf and watersports, plus nightly entertainment, including a disco on the beach. ⑦

Bluebay Villas Doradas ☎320-3000, Ⓦwww.bluebayresorts.com. Right on the beach and offering a higher standard of accommodation from the Playa Dorada norm, the *Bluebay* has good-sized, neatly decorated rooms, three pools, tennis courts, a spa with jacuzzi and sauna plus above-average buffet fare and decent à la carte restaurants. With a warm, intimate atmosphere this adult-only resort is a good couple's choice. ⑧

Casa Colonial ☎320-2111, Ⓦwww.casacolonialhotel.com. You won't get anything as commonplace as an all-inclusive package offered at the *Casa Colonial*, Playa Dorada's only true five-star luxury hotel. Small (just 50 rooms) and awfully stylish, it boasts large, high-ceilinged rooms with every facility imaginable including a sumptuously elegant restaurant, the best spa facilities in the area, high-speed internet access in the rooms and 24hr room service. If you can afford it (and you'll need at least US$360 a night), this is the place to come. ⑧

Celuisma Tropical Playa Dorada ☎320-6226, Ⓦwww.celuismacaribe.com. Towards the budget end of the scale so by no means the grandest of resorts, but the grounds are pleasant and the stretch of sand excellent with funky four-poster beach beds. The resort is in the process of being refurbished so room quality is variable and the food unremarkable, but over all you get good value for money. ⑥

Iberostar Costa Dorada ☎320-1550, Ⓦwww.iberostar.com. Just west of Playa Dorada on a stretch of coast known as Costa Dorada, this is one of the area's best hotels offering superior amenities, well-manicured gardens and comfortable rooms. The à la carte restaurants are above average. It is generally noisy and chaotic, though, so request a room in the 7000 block, which is shielded from the disco noise but still has good views from the balconies. ⑧

Costambar

Villas Felipe Guarionex ☎970-7312, Ⓦwww.villasfelipe.com. Good-value apart-hotel a few minutes from the beach comprising a collection of fully furnished fan-ventilated one-bedroom apartments set around a small pool. Shared BBQ also available. ④

Villas Jazmin Cristóbal Colón ☎970-7010, Ⓦwww.villasjazmin.com. Operates several blocks of one- and two-bedroom apartments a few minutes from the beach, from the standard no-frills variety (though still with a/c, cable TV & hot water) to the recently refurbished *Villas Jazmin Plus* (from US$200) boasting tasteful oak furnishings and top-notch electrical appliances. Wi-fi is available (extra charge) and there's a kids club, exercise room and tennis court. Huge discounts in low season. ⑥

Cofresí

Be Live Carey Paradise Drive ☎970-3364, Ⓦwww.belivecarey.com. Formerly *Sun Village Resorts*, this superior all-inclusive sprawls over the hillside behind the beach and boasts numerous oceanfront rooms and suites, five restaurants and a full-service spa. ⑦

Chris and Mady's Calle Cofresí ☎970-7502, Ⓦwww.chrisandmadys.com. Small new apartment block with plenty of natural light offering a couple of suites (one- and two-bedroom), a guesthouse room or studio flat – a good budget option. ④

Lifestyle Hacienda Resorts ☎586-1227, Ⓦwww.hacienda-resorts.com. A complex of three separate hotels; of these, *Crown Villas* is the best and by far the most expensive, comprising opulent villas, complete with private pool, grounds and a battalion of staff to pamper you for around US$5000 per night. *Tropical* has a better location, on the beach, better food, and is far easier on the wallet. ⑧

Tubagua

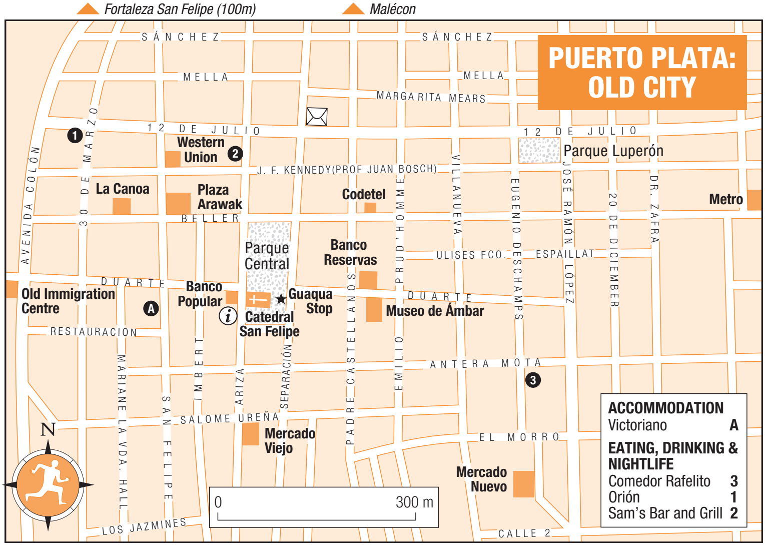
Tubagua Plantation Village Tubagua ☎970-7052, Ⓦwww.tubagua.com. Set high up in the hills above Puerto Plata, 30km along the mountain road to Santiago, this rustic eco-lodge is the perfect spot to escape the sultry coastal climate. A new project for the former proprietors of *Café Cito* in Puerto Plata, the place offers wood-and-thatch dormitory (US$25 per person per night) or semi-open A-frame bungalow accommodation, cooled by the breeze and equipped with mosquito nets. The place boasts superlative views along the coast, and has shared spring-fed solar-powered showers and a communal dining area. Fresh food – much of it grown in their organic gardens – is cooked in a traditional open kitchen. Prices include a substantial breakfast and there is free wi-fi. ⑤

Puerto Plata: the Old City

The once-exclusive **Old City** of Puerto Plata, a compact area bounded by Avenida Colón, the Malecón and Calle José Ramón López, visually retains much of the Victorian splendour of its past, when it was populated by wealthy landowners, dock workers and European merchants who made their fortunes exporting tobacco, sugar and cocoa. The elaborate gingerbread houses they built – Victorian mansions with ornate exteriors and first-floor balconies with stilt supports – still survive, even though time hasn't been kind to the majority of them.

Fortaleza San Felipe

A good place to begin wandering is the colonial-era **San Felipe fort** (9am–4.45pm, closed Sat; RD$100), a solid limestone edifice perched atop a rocky point at the seaside Malecón just west of Avenida Colón. The Spaniards built it in 1540 as a defence against corsairs and a prison for smugglers; when the city was torched in 1605, it was the lone structure to survive. There are now audio guides (in French or English) to accompany your clamberings round the towers and gun turrets, or down into the old prison cells that were in use throughout the Trujillo era. Some of the most esteemed figures in Dominican history have been imprisoned here, including Father of the Country Juan Pablo Duarte (incarcerated in 1844 after a bungled attempt to declare himself president) and the husbands of the national martyrs, the Mirabal sisters, who


PUERTO PLATA: OLD CITY
Fortaleza San Felipe (100m)
Malécon
SÁNCHEZ
MELLA
MARGARITA MEARS
12 DE JULIO
J. F. KENNEDY(PROF JUAN BOSCH)
BELLER
DUARTE
RESTAURACION
SALOME UREÑA
ANTERA MOTA
EL MORRO
LOS JAZMINES
CALLE 2
ULISES FCO. ESPAILLAT
AVENIDA COLÓN
30 DE MARZO
MARIANE LA VDA. HALL
SAN FELIPE
IMBERT
ARIZA
SEPARACIÓN
PADRE CASTELLANOS
EMILIO PRUD'HOMME
VILLANUEVA
EUGENIO DESCHAMPS
JOSÉ RAMÓN LÓPEZ
20 DE DICIEMBER
DR. ZAFRA
Western Union
La Canoa
Plaza Arawak
Parque Central
Codetel
Banco Reservas
Old Immigration Centre
Banco Popular
Catedral San Felipe
Guaqua Stop
Museo de Ámbar
Mercado Viejo
Mercado Nuevo
Parque Luperón
Metro
N
0 300 m
ACCOMMODATION
Victoriano A
EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE
Comedor Rafelito 3
Orión 1
Sam's Bar and Grill 2

were murdered by Trujillo's secret police after visiting their spouses in prison. The old prison houses a small **museum** with artefacts such as prisoners' shackles, cannonballs and coins.

Whether you decide to go inside the fort or not, you can't miss the views, particularly to the east where seaside **Parque Luperón** borders the fort, highlighted by a bronze equestrian statue of the general who ruled the country for a year from Puerto Plata. Cast your eyes towards town and atop a small hill you'll notice the impressively restored **lighthouse**, a rare cast-iron construction with an open spiral staircase that dates back to 1879. Unfortunately, it is not open to visitors.

The Parque Central and around

The heart of the more extensive Victorian city is the recently remodelled **Parque Central**, at the corner of Separación and Beller. The otherwise uninspiring paved plaza is enlivened by some smart palm trees interspersed with faux-colonial lamps. Its benches are arranged around a central two-storey **gazebo**, a 1960s replica of one that stood here a century earlier. Following hurricane and earthquake damage, the **Catedral San Felipe Apóstol** has also undergone stop-start surgery over the last ten years and now contains some splendid Italian stained-glass windows donated by local wealthy families.

The roads flanking the park are still accessible and boast some of the best **Victorian architecture** in the city, notably an impressive white gingerbread mansion on the northwest corner, which until recently served as a Pentecostal church. On the southeast corner, the pink gingerbread house at **Separación 22**, former home of a wealthy German merchant, is the city **cultural centre** and houses occasional exhibitions by local artists. The old Moorish **town hall** next door, which still serves as the office of the mayor, is another striking edifice. Stroll down almost any nearby street to see more such buildings, though many are in partial or complete disrepair.

If you're looking for a token reminder of the DR to take home, you could do worse than to visit one of the gift and craft shops north of the park. **La Canoa**, on

Beller, is probably the best of the bunch, where you'll also get the chance to see some local artists at work.

Museo de Ámbar and the mercados

One block east of the Parque Central on Duarte 61, the popular **Museo de Ámbar** (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm, closed Sun; RD$50; Ⓦ www.ambermuseum.com) comprises two floors of insects trapped in amber and various other amber-related exhibits in a renovated c.1900 mansion called Villa Bentz, built by one of the town's wealthiest German tobacco families. At the entrance, a few artefacts give you a sense of how the family lived. The first-floor museum, though, is the main draw, an amber collection culled from the mines in the Cordillera Septentrional south of Puerto Plata containing Jurassic and Triassic leaves, flowers, spiders, termites, wasps, ants and other insects, along with one small several-million-year-old lizard identical to those on the island today. There's also a gift shop with polished jewellery and chunks of raw amber for sale but you'll get a better selection elsewhere.

More opportunities for **shopping** can be found at the old and new markets, several blocks away in opposite directions. Aimed mainly at tourists, the **Mercado Nuevo**, on Isabela de Torres and Villanueva (daily 8am–9pm), is housed in a decaying, star-shaped concrete structure crammed with colourful, crowded stalls. Among the mass-produced Haitian paintings, T-shirts, lewd novelty items and maracas you'll find quality rums, Cuban cigars and some good wicker furniture, all fairly cheap if you're willing to haggle. The more locally orientated **Mercado Viejo**, on Ureña and Separación (daily 8am–6pm; prices not negotiable), spills onto the sidewalk from a series of former private homes and is necessarily more utilitarian, containing hardware, furniture, lawn flamingos and a **botánica**, a shop dedicated to syncretist religious items, marked by pictures and icons propped along the outside wall. This is as good as any place to learn about Dominican folk religion; ask and the owner will give you the address of one of the old-fashioned *brujos* – syncretist folk healers who are still a staple of rural Dominican life – who live in the outer barrios.

Avenida Colón and around

Avenida Colón marks the Old City's western boundary, with nothing too much of interest beyond it – just the port and the extremely poor barrio Agua Negra. Along Colón you'll find decrepit Victorian warehouses that once stored cargo waiting to be shipped to Europe. Despite thorough decay, much of their original ornamentation is still visible, including elegant, dangling icicle awnings on a few. At the corner of Colón and Duarte is the century-old **immigration centre**. There's not much to see now except a railway car that stands on its front lawn as

Puerto Plata festivals

Puerto Plata holds the usual Dominican festivals, a **fiesta patronal** – this one in honour of patron San Felipe on July 5, featuring large crowds drinking and dancing along the Malecón – and **Carnival**, in February, when hundreds of townspeople parade around in full regalia and thwack passers-by with inflated balloons. Perhaps better than either of these, however, is the renowned **Merengue Festival** – which typically sees parties right along the Malecón – usually held during the third week of October, though the exact timing varies slightly from year to year. A **cultural festival**, involving all sorts of music and dancing alongside art and craft exhibitions, takes place annually in the third week of June round the fort and central plaza.

an informal monument to the long-gone railway that transported tobacco from the Cibao region. Back to the east, **Plaza Arawak**, San Felipe and Beller (Mon–Fri 8.30am–5pm), is an office building with a pleasant central plaza that displays a modest collection of stone Taino sculptures known as *cemis*, notable for their grimacing features and inward-spiralling eyes. Discovered just west of Puerto Plata and at Samaná's Cuevas de Agua, the artefacts were physical embodiments of the Taino gods used in ecstatic religious ceremonies.

Puerto Plata: the New City

Puerto Plata's **New City** spreads outward in three directions from the Old, roughly confined by the port, Circunvalación Sur and Avenida Hermanas Mirabal, though additional, less-developed barrios exist beyond this convenient circumscription. The majority of the area is taken up by residential neighbourhoods and heavy industry, and particular sights of interest are well spread out, so you'll need to take a *motoconcho* or taxi to get from place to place.

The centre of social life is the 2km-long **Malecón**, a spacious ocean promenade dotted with hotels and cafés. During the day it's a fairly quiet spot to hang out or stroll on the beach. In the evening at weekends a line of purpose-built wooden bars opens up along the beachfront and the whole place comes to life. If you're planning to make a night of it here, you'll need to keep your wits about you as petty thievery and prostitution are rife.

At the Malecón's eastern end is the town's former social fulcrum, **Long Beach**, which in 2006 was given a US$7 million facelift as part of a government scheme to improve the area. This involved shutting down and demolishing (with little warning) the collection of ramshackle bars there, replenishing the beach with sand brought in from Río San Juan, and replacing the open sewage outlet with a proper treatment works. Only the latter could be described as an unqualified success; the removal of the bars has drastically changed the character of the area, driving away

Climbing Mount Isabela

Climbing Mount Isabela de Torres is a challenge that some can't resist. Iguana Mama (☎571-0908, Ⓦwww.iguanamama.com), an adventure outfit based in Cabarete (see p.189), runs twice-weekly (Mon & Fri) **hiking excursions** to the top that take off from Puerto Plata (US$88); you then take the **cable car** back down. If you want to make the trek on your own, there's a well-marked **path** on the opposite side of the mountain, starting at the pueblo El Cupey. Head east on the C-5 to the junction of the Carretera Turística and turn right. Just beyond the intersection is a marked **dirt road** leading to the pueblo – an isolated outpost tucked between two mountains. It has few facilities, though a couple of local farmers rent out horses and guides for the ascent. The Isabela hike is an arduous 4hr trek up the 820m mountain through a canopy of rainforest; **start early** to maximise your chance of a clear view from the summit. If lucky you may catch sight of the endangered **Hispaniola parrot** or the red-tailed hawk. There's also a small system of **Taino caves** with petroglyphs near the summit, an hour's hike west off the main path. Look for a guide in El Cupey if you want to see them.

Another great hike from the town is the trail that leads away from Mount Isabela up to the Río Camú and **La Cueva del Gallo**, an underground river cave several hundred metres long that traverses the side of the mountain to the south of **El Cupey**. Just 3km from the pueblo, it's a less rugged hike than the Isabela trek and can be done in half a day.

much tourism. A few locals walk their dogs there in the morning, but otherwise the place is empty.

From here Avenida Hermanas Mirabal extends inland to Avenida Circunvalación and, just to the east the **Brugal Rum bottling factory**, across from the Plaza Turisol (Mon–Fri 8am–3.30pm; free). You'll no doubt recognize the distinctive red, white and blue Brugal logo, even if you've never sampled its products, as it appears on town signs sponsored by the company throughout the country. It's a popular stop-off for tour groups but individuals can just turn up and join a tour, which, like the signs, is little more than a PR exercise for the local rum company; visitors are shown a brief video and get a quick glance at the bottling and packing operations before enjoying some free rum-based margaritas.

Puerto Plata's crowning attraction is the suspended **cable-car ride** (daily 8.30am–5pm; adults RD$350, children under 10 RD$200; ☎970-0501) that goes to the top of Mount Isabela de Torres. The entrance is at the far western end of town past the port, just off the Circunvalación Sur on Camino de los Dominguez, a RD$50 *motoconcho*- or US$15 taxi-ride away. It's definitely not to be missed; the views of the city on this 25-minute trip to the top of the 800m peak are stupendous. At the summit a statue of Christ the Redeemer, a slightly downsized version of the Río de Janeiro landmark with its arms spread out over the city, crowns a manicured lawn. Also on the grounds are a botanical garden, a pricey café (Tues–Sun) and a **souvenir shop**. The mountain is now a protected national park, covered by rainforest on its far side and inhabited by 32 species of indigenous bird. Don't wander too far beyond the area marked off for tourists, as Mount Isabela is in the process of splitting in two. The brown splotch along its face, visible from the city, is a landslide created by the split, and there are a number of deep fissures at the summit.

Playa Dorada

PLAYA DORADA, just 3km east of Puerto Plata on the C-5 but truly a world away, is walled off from the outside universe; inside its confines are fourteen separate resorts, each an entity unto itself, with restaurants, discos, swimming pools, hot tubs and an array of sports facilities. Meandering between them is a Robert Trent Jones-designed **golf course**. Frequented by half a million package tourists per year, Playa Dorada is the perfect place to lie for a few days on a beach and be pampered, though those seeking more than a cruise ship on sand may find its alluring promotion campaign – like the city of gold after which it was named – a mirage.

The **beach** is the main draw, 2km of golden sand from which you're treated to terrific views of Mount Isabela. The **hotels** offer a variety of activities that take up much of the space, including beach volleyball, spaghetti-eating contests, merengue lessons, parasailing and group aerobics. All of this plus the numerous local souvenir vendors and hair braiders, and touts flogging timeshare apartments makes for a frenetic scene, but there are still places reserved for tranquil sun worship. All in all, it's basically a great big vacation gulag, but it's nice enough that you may find yourself experiencing Stockholm Syndrome after a day or two. Various **day-passes** are available from most resorts, which entitle non-residents to use of their facilities.

Tours

The popularity of Playa Dorada has attracted some professional **tour operators** offering a variety of interesting day-trips. Outback Safari, Plaza Turisol, Avenida Luperón Km 2.5 (☎244-4886, Ⓦwww.outbacksafari.com.do), is the best of the adventure **jeep tour** outfits, with a tour (US$79) that includes coffee with a local family, swimming in a clear Cordillera Septentrional stream and boogie-boarding on a less popular north-coast beach. There's always a bit of rum flowing so expect it to become quite lively as the day wears on. There's alcohol aplenty too on the various **catamaran cruises** that ply the coast, generally sailing to Sosúa and back, breaking for snorkelling and lunch in Sosúa bay. Best of the bunch is Tip Top (ⓣ 710-0503, ⓦ www.catamarandomrep.com; US$65), which sails out of Maimón, west of Puerto Plata, alternating excursions to Sosúa with trips to Luperón. Freestyle Catamarans provide the Playa Dorada hotels with a wilder booze-cruise snorkelling trip to Sosúa and back, including snorkelling, lunch and free drinks.

By far the best **scuba-diving** shop in town is Sea Pro Divers in Plaza Playa Dorada (ⓣ 320-2567, ⓦ www.seaprodivers.com); most of their local dives are around Sosúa. A two-tank day trip costs US$90 (including equipment rental and transport) whereas you can also sign up for an eight-dive package, spread out over several days for US$300. A popular recent addition to the tours on offer is the Yasika Adventure (Mon–Sat 8am–5pm; ⓣ 650-2323, ⓦ www.yasikaadventures.com; US$84, cash only) an exhilarating **zipline** ride, which has you whizzing between ten platforms above the forest canopy high up in the Cordillera Septentrional, close to the village of Yásica on the mountain road to Santiago. Note there's a US$14 discount if you book directly with them, rather than via your hotel, and a US$5 supplement for pick-ups from Sosúa, Cabarete or Cofresí. A more leisurely way to see the countryside is to saddle up at Rancho Lorilar, the north coast's largest stable, just below Mount Isabela. They offer highly professional **horse riding** in small groups with excellent guides: two hours for US$50, and a full-day tour for US$70 (US$10 extra for a private outing); the latter includes lunch and a refreshing dip in a lagoon. Prices include hotel transfer.

Also check out Iguana Mama (see p.189), which operates out of Cabarete but offers mountain-bike trips and the like in the mountains south of here.

Costambar and Cofresí

Costambar, 2km west of Puerto Plata on the C-5, is a rambling settlement of townhouses and private homes, time-shared, rented or owned by expats and well-to-do Dominicans. Once you make your way through a spaghetti bowl of lanes, you'll find a lightly populated **beach** far better than the one in Puerto Plata, though it offers little shade. Only a RD$50 *motoconcho* ride from the Parque Central, it has a handful of restaurants right on the water offering pizza and sandwiches, and views across the harbour of the city lights are an added bonus at night.

From Costambar, it's a further 3km, and an extra RD$50 on a motorbike, to **Playa Cofresí**, named after infamous Puerto Rican pirate Roberto Cofresí (born Robert Kupferstein), though there's no documented link between them. Once home to a small fishing village, Cofresí's golden beach is now backed by a number of hotel and resort complexes. The ocean near here gets extremely choppy, better for bodysurfing and boogie-boarding than a pleasant swim. Along the beach you'll find a few beach shacks serving delicious fried fish with *tostones* and beer for as little as RD$350. There are also a couple of good nearby restaurants (see p.175).

Ocean World

Opened in 2004, Cofresí's impressive **Ocean World** (daily 9am–5pm; ⓣ 291-1000, ⓦ www.oceanworld.net) is the premiere tourist attraction on the north coast, with its own casino and a marina that acts as a major port of entry to the country, welcoming fully-laden cruises ships throughout the year. Modelled on Florida's

SeaWorld, the ambitious US$25 million complex on the far western end of the beach features massive artificial lagoons housing dolphins, nurse sharks, sea lions, stingrays and even a tiger. You can snorkel over an artificial reef full of colourful tropical fish, view tanks of piranhas and aviaries filled with Hispaniolan parakeets, parrots and toucans. It doesn't come cheap; general admission is US$55 (US$40 for small children and seniors), which includes lunch – though the food is mediocre at best. For additional fees you can swim with the dolphins, or as the promotional blurb rather awkwardly puts it, indulge in "dolphin petting, feeding, kisses and hugs" (an extra US$110 for adults, US$80 for small children and seniors). Swimming with sea lions or nurse sharks and stingrays apparently draws a less enthusiastic response, as this only costs an extra US$15.

Eating

Puerto Plata has several decent **restaurants** – from rice-and-bean *comedores* to more upmarket places – and quite a few ordinary ones. Most are scattered within the Old City and along the Malecón. If staying at an all-inclusive at Playa Dorada, you'll be largely restricted to whatever is provided by your hotel, although there are a couple of independent restaurants if you fancy a change (and spending some money). The mid-range restaurants that dot Costambar are also a good option for dinner. If cooking for yourself, stock up on **groceries** at the Malecón's unmissable lemon-yellow monolith, the hypermarket La Sirena (Mon–Sat 8am–10pm, Sun 9am–9pm), which also has a food court.

Puerto Plata & Playa Dorada

Aguaceros Malecón 32. Tasty Mexican dishes served in a festive, oceanfront barn. The fried chicken wings are good and reasonably priced, and they do potent cocktails.

Las Almendras Malecón. With tables set up beneath tall shady trees just across from the seafront, this is a nice spot to sit and watch the world go by on a hot day. The limited menu sticks to the staples and the food, though decent, is rather overpriced.

La Esquina D' Pacheco Hermanas Mirabal, at the back of the stadium. Simple corner spot serving up fresh fruit juices and cheap *comida criolla*. Daily until 8pm, 10pm weekends.

Lucia *Casa Colonial*, Playa Dorada ☎ 320-2111, ⓦ www.casacolonialhotel.com. Stylishly attired waiters attend to your every need in this beautiful, high-ceilinged dining room adorned with tasteful tropical blooms. In fact the service is even better than the expensive Asian-fusion cuisine, which, though good, is rather heavy on the sauces. Evenings only.

Las Palmas Luis Ginebra 47 ☎ 586-7065. Upmarket Italian restaurant-café set on the wraparound balcony of a colonial mansion, partially sheltered from the street noise by its shady garden. It attracts a discerning clientele from as far away as Santiago with a wide-ranging menu, from the classic *saltimbocca a la Romana* – veal with cured ham and sage – to imported Aberdeen Angus steaks (RD$$750). Seafood mains from around RD$500. Closed Tues.

La Parillada Circunvalación Sur ☎ 586-7923. The best steak in town chargrilled on a vast barbecue – along with sausages, chicken and other assorted meats – Argentinean style. A pleasant eating spot despite its proximity to the roundabout. Closed Mon.

Sam's Bar and Grill Ariza 34. A cross between a Wild West saloon and a down-at-heel pub, this established meeting place for fellow travellers offers good-value daily specials. Pies, fish & chips and apple crumble appeal to homesick Brits while the Philly cheesesteak, made with filet mignon, is highly recommended. All-day American breakfasts (RD$250) served as well, plus internet access and live sports on TV.

Costambar

Buddy's Almirante 11. Standard burger and seafood joint in an outdoor patio a block from the beach.

El Carey Beach Bar Costambar Beach. A bustling spot on the beach, good for burgers, soft-shell tacos and grilled fish. Fridays are barbecue nights, with bonfires on the beach.

Cenica Costambar main entrance. Formerly *El Portal*, this excellent and reasonably priced restaurant serves home-cooked Dominican fare in a thatch-roofed patio setting. The fish is tender and fresh, and the *sancocho* and *mofongo* are sublime.

La Perla Negra Almirante and Cadiz. Best spot within Costambar for authentic, low-priced Dominican cooking, including *mofongo*, *sopa de pescado* and fried fish.

Cofresí

Chris & Mady's Calle Cofresí ⓣ970-7052, ⓦwww.chrisandmadys.com. Relaxed open-air beachfront bar popular with expats and travellers alike, dishing up quality burgers, seafood and meat dishes. The grilled *mahi-mahi* is a house speciality and the Sunday BBQ a draw. Main courses from RD$600 and breakfast bacon and eggs (RD$190) are available all day. Free wi-fi. 7.30am–10pm.

Le Papillon Villas Cofresí ⓣ970-7640, ⓦwww.le-papillon.de. Long-standing fine-dining favourite, this relatively formal German-owned (but French-leaning) restaurant is across the highway from Playa Cofresí, with a host of terrific meat and seafood dishes (with surf 'n' turf a speciality) and some vegetarian options. Open from 6pm. Closed Mon.

Los Tres Cocos Las Rocas ⓣ993-4503. Delightful Austrian restaurant with a menu featuring schnitzel and a host of more creative dishes at moderate prices in a romantic setting.

Drinking and nightlife

Fed by a metropolitan combination of dance-crazy Dominicans and vacationing foreigners, a slew of **clubs** in Puerto Plata are crammed with dancers until dawn. You won't find a lot of local live music, but big-name merengue acts pass through the major discos on a regular basis. The **bar** scene is dominated by expat establishments, which can be fun places to meet some colourful characters. In addition to the clubs listed below, the outlying barrios south of the Circunvalación Sur generally feature a small *colmado* equipped with cassette player, tables and chairs, providing a more laid back, rural feel.

Although the **Playa Dorada** resort **discos** are open to all, the majority are pretty boring and half-empty; those listed below do the best trade, more often than not crowded with a mix of foreign visitors and Dominicans.

Puerto Plata

Ojilvio's Carwash Colón, just north of Circunvalación Sur. Typical "car wash" style Dominican watering hole-cum-dance venue, frequented mostly by locals though it does see limited tourist traffic. Earplugs might be a good idea, but it does give you a great sense of what the local nightlife is all about.

Orión 30 de Marzo and 12 de Julio. Slightly seedy and intimidating, but one of the most popular dance spots in town, strictly featuring merengue and bachata.

Tam Tam Malecón. Small, open-front expat hangout at the western end of the Malecón. The conversation tends to be better than the food, but it's a nice place to hang out with a beer.

Playa Dorada

Coco Bongo Playa Dorada Plaza. Small, dark nightclub that can get really crowded as it's the current dancing hotspot, attracting both tourists and Dominicans, mixing the occasional merengue and salsa with a hefty dose of dance, reggaeton, hip-hop and house. Cover charge for resort non-residents. Open late.

Hemingway's Café Playa Dorada Plaza. Haven for crazed, drunken tourists intent on having a good time. Good-quality American comfort food – burgers, ribs and steaks – though at US prices. Thursdays play host to ear-splitting karaoke while Saturdays see "Latin nights". Free wi-fi and no cover, except when big-name bands pass through. Open late.

Sports and entertainment

The annual cultural festival aside (see box, p.177), Puerto Plata is no cultural centre, but there are plenty of diversions. The old José Brieño **baseball** stadium, just by the roundabout linking Circunvalación Sur with Avenida Hermanas Mirabal, occasionally stages exhibition games. However, the lack of a roof prevents it from hosting professional competitions during the winter season – the authorities fear that Puerto Plata's high rainfall would see too many games cancelled. Nonetheless, it still provides a venue for travelling circuses and revivalist religious meetings.

Just 2km east of the Playa Dorada complex is **Fun City Action Park** (ⓣ320-1031, ⓦwww.funcity-gokarts.com), a popular complex that's a great place to distract the kids for an afternoon, with four separate go-kart tracks, plus bumper cars and a playground. A RD$350 day-pass (RD$250 for kids 12 and under) gets you unlimited rides, though food and drinks are not included.

There are two *club gallísticos* with regular **cockfighting** – one at Parque Duarte on Hernández (Tues & Sun 2–6pm), the other on Circunvalación Sur across the street from the Brugal Rum plant (Fri–Sun 1.30–5.30pm). If you don't want to be a spectator, **golf** is a popular option; Costambar has a modest nine-hole course, but virtually everyone goes to the magnificent Robert Trent Jones course at Playa Dorada (ⓣ320-4272, ⓦwww.playadoradagolf.com), with exquisitely maintained lawns and several links holes.

More sedentary pastimes include Cine Roma, Beller 35 (ⓣ320-7010), a noisy **cinema** featuring subtitled second-run American shows daily at 5.30pm and 8.30pm. Close to Playa Dorada but similar in price is the newer Cinemar complex on the first floor of Plaza Playa Dorada (ⓣ320-1400). There are also large, neon **casinos** at the *Puerto Plata Beach* on the Malecón, at the *Paradise Beach* and *Golden Beach Holiday Village* in Playa Dorada, and (the largest and best) at Ocean World (see p.206), all with the same standard set of slot machines, blackjack, roulette and craps tables. All are open from 4pm to 3 or 4am.

Listings

Ambulance Dial ⓣ911 in case of emergency.

Banks and currency exchange There are several banks with ATMs on and around the Parque Central and one in the La Sirena hypermarket on the Malecón (see map, p.166).

Car rental Reputable operators at the airport include Alamo (ⓣ586-0285, ⓦwww.alamo.com); Avis (ⓣ586-0214, ⓦwww.avis.com), which also has on office on the main C-5 highway, opposite the entrance to El Pueblicito Plaza Commercial; Budget (ⓣ586-0284, ⓦwww.budget.com) and also in Playa Dorada (ⓣ320-4888); Europcar (ⓣ586-0215, ⓦwww.europcar.com), which also has a branch in town on Av Hermanas Mirabal; and Hertz (ⓣ586-0200, ⓦwww.hertz.com).

Consulates Canadian Consulate, Calle Villanueva 8 (Mon–Fri 9am–1pm; ⓣ586-5761, ⓦwww.canadainternational.gc.ca); Honorary British Consulate, Beller 51 (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm; ⓣ586-4244, ⓦwww.ukinthedominicanrepublic.fco.gov.uk); US Consulate, corner of Villanueva & J.F. Kennedy (Mon–Fri 8.30am–12.30pm & 2–5pm; ⓣ586-4204, ⓦwww.santodomingo.usembassy.gov/ca_pp-e.html).

Dental Dr Freddy Lepe, corner of Duarte & Villanueva (ⓣ586-6666).

Hospital Clínica Dr José Gregora Hernández, 27 de Febrero 21 (ⓣ586-1106); Clínica Dr Brugal, Ariza 15 and Kennedy (ⓣ586-2519). Both have 24hr emergency facilities. Also a medical centre attached to the Be Live Carey in Cofresí.

Laundry Most hotels have laundry service; otherwise go to Lavendería Puerto Plata, Justo 2 at Av Circunvalación Sur (Mon–Sat 8am–6pm).

Pharmacy Of the numerous pharmacies scattered around town, the best stocked is Super Farmacia Metropolis, Beller 129 (ⓣ261-1200). A 24hr pharmacy is Farmacia Deleyte, Kennedy 89, in front of Parque Luperón.

Police Central station at Carretera 5 Km 1 (ⓣ586-2331).

Post office Puerto Plata's efficient main post office is on the corner of 12 de Julio and Separación. EPS, a private postal service, is at Carretera 5 Km 3, Plaza Turisol.

Telephone Codetel, Beller between Prud'Homme and Padre Castellanos (daily 8am–6pm).

Around Puerto Plata: the Río Damajagua waterfalls

Just outside the town of **Imbert**, around 15km southwest of Puerto Plata, you can visit and climb (and sometimes even slide down) a stunning series of **waterfalls** along the high, early course of the Río Damajagua (daily 8.00am–3pm; RD$280–$490, including guide; Ⓦwww.27charcos.com). The 27 natural, boulder-strewn cascades snake down the side of a mountain wilderness, the water crashing down at breakneck speed. It's a wet, challenging and extremely rewarding hike up, with a great hilltop view at the end. If not part of an organized tour – most of the operators in Puerto Plata, Sosúa and Cabarete offer the trip – pack your swimsuit and make sure you're wearing robust **footwear** before heading southwest from Puerto Plata along the C-5 until you see the Damajagua sign 3km south of the Imbert Texaco station. From here a road leads east for 500m to a visitor centre where you pay the admission fee, meet your guide and pick up the life-jackets and mandatory safety helmets. From here, it's a 20min hike to the falls. Each individual cascade has its own feature. Some have pools for **swimming** or ladders for climbing up, while others have natural chutes waiting to be slid down. The climbs can be pretty steep and the flow of water fierce at times, particularly after heavy rains, and you should exercise extreme caution at all times. **Children** under 8 eight are only allowed to tackle the first cascade.

The **visitor centre**, which has an attached restaurant, is a sign of the site's growing popularity and importance to the local tourist industry. Now designated a national monument, the falls have become an almost obligatory stop-off for the region's all-inclusive tour operators. The revenue generated has allowed the authorities to upgrade the paths linking the falls, several of which have been turned into nature trails. The surrounding community has also benefited with a percentage of each admission fee set aside for local development projects.

You can easily do the cascades as a **day-trip** from Puerto Plata – take one of the frequent Javilla Tours buses to Imbert then hop on the back of a *motoconcho*; alternatively a taxi will set you back US$60, including wait time.

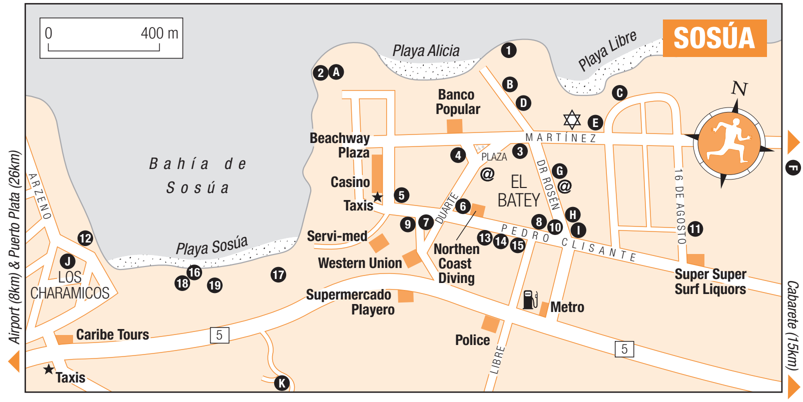
East of Puerto Plata

Resort development around Puerto Plata has gobbled up most of the prime beachfront east of the city; as such, you'll have to trawl the coast all the way to **Río San Juan**, some 70km away, to find anything approaching unspoilt coastline. If you're up for a bustling resort town offering plenty of adventure sports and some great nightlife, though, you couldn't do better than burgeoning **Cabarete**, a kiteboarding and windsurfing enclave. Just west of Cabarete, **Sosúa** has a different kind of appeal, offering more sheltered beaches, a plethora of hotels, restaurants and some decent nightlife. Wherever you go, there are plenty of hidden pleasures in the **Cordillera Septentrional** bordering the coast, including a secluded gourmet Indian restaurant and several ranches offering horse riding expeditions into mountain wilderness.

Sosúa

Set along a sheltered horseshoe inlet impressed into the eastern end of Bahía de Sosúa, the large resort town of **SOSÚA** has a bit of a bumpy history, now somewhat hard to detect as few visitors make it past the inviting beaches. It was created in the late nineteenth century by the **United Fruit Company**, which used it as a port for their extensive banana plantations along today's El Choco Road. In 1916, following a pattern that would be repeated throughout the Americas in the twentieth century, United Fruit abruptly abandoned their operations in the Dominican Republic, and Sosúa lay mostly derelict until the early 1940s, when Trujillo provided refuge for several hundred Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany, who settled just east of Playa Sosúa and created the barrio known as El Batey. Here, they formed a successful dairy cooperative – Productos Sosúa – which operates to this day.

The first stirrings of tourism came in the 1970s as wealthy Dominicans and retiring foreigners began building winter beach homes in the area. The explosion of sex tourism in the 1980s brought on the real boom, however, as young Dominican women from the outlying rural districts supported families back home by catering to the desires of tens of thousands of travellers. Large-scale hotel development ensued, and much of the traditional fishing and agriculture was abandoned. The wealthy retirees petitioned against this unsavoury atmosphere and, in 1996, finally convinced the government to act; over the course of a year, the national police closed every bar in Sosúa. With its controversial lifeblood squeezed dry, the local economy promptly collapsed, leaving an abundance of empty hotels and restaurants. Slowly but surely the town has risen from its ashes, helped in no small part by low prices but also because it really is a pleasant little town with a great beach. Nonetheless, although no longer the town's main attraction, the sex trade is still much more noticeable here than in any other Dominican resort along this stretch.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LOS CHARAMICOS
EL BATEY
PLAZA
MARTÍNEZ
DR ROSÉN
DUARTE
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LIBRE
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ACCOMMODATION	
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Casa Valeria	H
Casa Veintiuno	K
Mary Rose	F
New Garden	G
Pensión Anneliese	B
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Rocky's	I
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Bogey's Pica Pollo	6
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La Dolce Vita	4
La Finca	3
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Bar Jack's	16
Brittania Pub	14
Club 59	8
Jolly Roger	13
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Rocky's	I

Arrival and getting around

Many who come here arrive directly from Puerto Plata's international **airport**, 12km west (see p.165). **Taxis** into town should cost around US$20. You can also take a *motoconcho* for RD$200, or walk onto the C-5 and flag down a **guagua** for RD$20. The main bus stops are on the C-5 at the town's two main entrances, from where it's a few minutes' walk.

Metro Tours **buses** (ⓦwww.metroserviciosturisticos.com) travelling to and from Santo Domingo (RD$320), via Puerto Plata and Santiago, pick up and drop off passengers five times a day (in each direction) by the Texaco station on the C-5. Caribe Tours has its office further west along the main road at the entrance to Los Chamaricos, the traditional Dominican neighbourhood to the west of Playa Sosúa, and does the same trip. So too does Transporte del Cibao, next door, though on slightly more battered buses for a little less.

Guaguas shuttle constantly between Río San Juan (RD$160) and Puerto Plata (RD$30), drawing in at the two main stops in town during daylight hours. After then, you'll be reliant on *públicos*, charging slightly more (RD$40–50), which leave from the local terminal across the road from the Texaco station.

Sosúa is divided in two by 500m-wide Playa Sosúa and the bay in front of it. **Los Charamicos** to the west, with two principal entrances from the C-5, is generally crowded with *motoconchos*. In between, its bustling, narrow streets are arranged into an unfathomable one-way system. East of Playa Sosúa, **El Batey** was the Jewish quarter and is now the tourism hub.

Walking is your best option for **getting around** within the neighbourhoods, and crossing the beach on foot is the easiest way to travel between the two barrios, given that the heavy traffic on the main road makes travel by *motoconcho* less desirable. The local taxi operator has several stands; the main one is by the casino in the main plaza with rates posted outside.

Accommodation

Sosúa has plenty of **accommodation** options; most hotels are in El Batey, but there are also a couple of budget options in Los Charamicos. In addition, there has been a major boom in private homes and gated condominium construction over the years, which means you can also rent an entire house or flat for a week or more for around what a luxury hotel room would cost.

El Batey

Casa Marina Beach Martínez ⓣ571-3690, ⓦwww.casamarinabeachhotel.com. 330-room all-inclusive complex squeezed into a small beachfront plot, offering plenty of activities. Usual standard accommodations and a choice of Italian, seafood and Mexican restaurants as well as the ubiquitous buffet fare. ⑦

Casa Valeria Dr Rosén 28 ⓣ571-3565, ⓦwww.hotelcasavaleria.com. A top-class mid-range choice, with a selection of rooms and apartments (sleeping up to four, with kitchens) set back from the road surrounding a small pool and leafy garden. The simple terracotta-tiled rooms have TVs and a/c and are decorated in a comforting, homely style. There's also a good restaurant serving breakfast in the morning, plus a mix of Dominican and international dishes come evening. ④

Casa Veintiuno Reparto Taváres and Piano 1 ⓣ829/342-8089, ⓦwww.casaveintiuno.com. Deluxe Belgian-owned B&B in a gorgeous modern building with sleek, sophisticated furnishings, top-notch electrical appliances and warm hosts. With only three rooms you can expect a personalized service. Pool, gym and gourmet restaurant on site. ⑦

Hotel El Rancho Sosúa Dr Rosén 36 ⓣ571-4070, ⓦwww.hotelelranchososua.com. Good-value rustic-style hotel with thatched roof, terracotta tiles and rough plastering set round a small pool and tropical garden frequented by hummingbirds. The 17 small rooms, which all have fan, cable TV, fridge and wi-fi, are all brightly painted with themed murals and matching bas-relief in the bathrooms; some have a kitchenette. The on-site café-bar provides tasty tapas. ④

Mary Rose Martínez 33 ⓣ882-8221, ⓦwww.maryrosedr.com. Good-value brand-new one- and two-bedroom self-catering apartments set round a pleasant pool. Fully fitted kitchens, a/c, wi-fi and flat-screen cable TV. Excellent rates for longer rentals (US$275/week plus US$30 for cleaning) and concessions for divers with Northern Coast Diving. ⑤

New Garden Dr Rosén ⓣ571-1557, ⓦwww.newgardenhotel.net. Decent mid-range option on a quiet street, with spacious rooms in a large motel-like complex set around a central pool. It also boasts an Italian restaurant and a welcoming garden. ④

Pensión Anneliese Dr Rosén ⓣ905-1946, ⓦwww.weblatino.de/pension. The closest you get to a hostel in Sosúa: an ageing but relaxing hotel around 100m from the seafront, with ten clean rooms. The large front rooms share an ocean-facing balcony, and there's a secluded pool in the back. Rooms have a fan, a fridge and cable TV. Breakfast is available for around US$5 and airport transfer and wi-fi are free. ⑤

Piergiorgio Palace Hotel La Puntilla 2 ⓣ571-2626, ⓦwww.piergiorgiopalace.com. The town's most glamorous choice set in a faux-Victorian manor right on a fabulous rocky promontory. The high-standard rooms have balconies (some with sea vistas – though some newly erected condos have blighted the views somewhat) and all the amenities. Offers both a room rate, which includes a buffet breakfast, and an all-inclusive option with meals at the excellent *La Puntilla* restaurant (see p.183). ⑦

Rocky's Dr Rosén 22 ⓣ571-2951, ⓦwww.rockysbar.com. Cheap rooms (especially for El Batey) that are a little spartan but do have satellite TV, ceiling fans, hot water & wi-fi; some have optional a/c. They're set at the back of the popular bar (see p.184), which means it doesn't get quiet until around midnight. ③

Sosúa by the Sea Martínez and Phillips ⓣ571-3222, ⓦwww.sosuabythesea.com. Very clean and tidy hotel – though rack rates are overpriced – with friendly staff offering B&B and all-inclusive deals. It possesses a decent strip of beach, a selection of airy a/c rooms and a dive centre but can get crowded and noisy in the high season. The water pressure/temperature can be a little temperamental. ⑧

Los Charamicos

Villa Mar Arzeno, near the beach entrance ⓣ571-2256, ⓦwww.villamarsosua.com. An old villa (formerly *Villa Almonte)* with a friendly atmosphere and double rooms or apartments (from US$45) – some with kitchens and balconies with water views – that vary in size and price, sleeping up to six. All have fans, hot water and a fridge. Good long-term rates are available. Wi-fi and TV hire also possible. ③

El Batey

El Batey maintains a bright and somewhat jovial disposition despite its troubled past. The main epicentre stretches along Pedro Clisante between Dr Rosén and Duarte to the west, with most of the action focused on and around the junction. The surrounding streets are peaceful and tidy with well-established gardens, and in recent years malls have been going up in place of some of the town's oldest buildings. The major changes have included the demolition of the original **United Fruit Company warehouse**, at the western end of Duarte, and its replacement with banks and shops. Another is the old **Refugees Barracks** on the junction of Martínez (not to be confused with Martínez 1) and Duarte. The town's most unappealing addition is the unsightly **casino**, a vast monolith that lords over the main plaza. More positively, a small new beach has been formed, courtesy of Hurricane George, just east of the old barracks in front of *On the Waterfront* (see p.183). Access to **Playa Alicia**'s soft sand is via the restaurant. Unlike Playa Sosúa, there is no natural shade, but you can rent umbrellas and enjoy a more peaceful environment.

The Jewish legacy still remains in Sosúa and one block east of Duarte, on Martínez and Dr Rosén, you'll find the old **synagogue**, a simple wooden structure adorned with a fifty-year-old Star of David, and still used by a number of practising Jewish-Dominican descendants of the settlers. There's a small museum attached, **El Museo de Sosúa**, though at the time of writing it had been closed for a few months and its future was uncertain. It recounts the early experiences of Jewish refugees and the development of the agricultural cooperative through photographs and a few of the settlers' personal effects. The settlers' enormous pasteurizing plant is next door and still in operation; indeed, Productos Sosúa remains the largest dairy producer on the island.

East of the dairy plant, a walkway leads to **Playa Libre** and its all-inclusive hotels. A several-hundred-metre sandy cove enclosed by a cliff, the beach has become a haven for package tourists who want to avoid the hassles of Playa Sosúa. Atop the cliff is a large, communal **terrace**, which makes a pleasant place from which to admire the bay.

Playa Sosúa

Crescent-shaped and bounded by cliffs, 500m-long Playa Sosúa separates the town's two barrios. The small bay's water is generally completely placid and transparent, a contrast to the crowded stretch of sand and, just behind it, the row of shaded bars, lobster-tank restaurants and souvenir shops that runs the entire length of the beach. There are over 180 units in total and you stand a good chance of being accosted by the proprietor of every single one. Some stalls rent snorkelling equipment for the reef just outside the inlet, which isn't especially spectacular but does hold some tropical fish. For better snorkelling options, contact one of the dive shops (see box below).

Los Charamicos

West of Playa Sosúa spreads the Dominican barrio of **Los Charamicos**, a tangle of narrow streets lined by musky shacks selling food supplies and rum, *motoconchos* manoeuvring past stickball-playing children as older locals take it all in from their front-door stoops. **Calle Arzeno** skirts the barrio's eastern edge, boasting several good open-air restaurants and great views of the beach below. At the far western end of town on Calle Morris Ling, the local **cockfighting arena** is undoubtedly one of the most authentic places to observe this violent ritual and the enthusiastic crowds it attracts. Four blocks west, a dirt road turns sharply down to rubbish-strewn **Playa Chiquita,** the locals' beach of choice, full of families and teens barbecuing pigs over bonfires and engaging in general merriment. Sosúa's **fiesta patronal**, in honour of San Antonio, is held on June 13 in Los Charamicos.

Diving from Sosúa

Sosúa is the best place on the north coast for diving and home to one of the best **diving** outfits on the island, Northern Coast Divers, Pedro Clisante 8 (Ⓣ571-1028, Ⓦwww.northerncoastdiving.com). The multilingual staff run daily boat trips to several local hotspots, including the Airport Wall, a 33m wall dive with **tunnels**, and the Canyon, two walls formed by the splitting of the reef only 2m apart. They also head further afield to the mangroves of Río San Juan and the Caverns of Cabrera (otherwise known as El Lago Dudú). The further away from Sosúa you go the better, since the local area has been sadly stripped of its reefs and there are few signs of nearby sea life. **First-time** dives start from US$60, with PADI Open Water courses from US$325. The shop can also arrange **snorkelling** trips as well as pick-ups from nearby resorts and now have affordable **self-catering apartments** (see *Mary Rose*, p.181). Merlin Dive Centre (Ⓣ571-2963, Ⓦwww.merlin-diving.com) and Big Blue Swiss Dive Centre (Ⓣ571-2916, Ⓦwww.big-blue-diving-sosua.com), both on the beach road, also enjoy good reputations.

Eating

Sosúa has more than its share of **restaurants**, from the simple *pica pollo* establishments and stand-up cafeterias in Los Charamicos, to reasonable seafood spots and elegant waterfront dining rooms in El Batey. In between, Playa Sosúa boasts numerous largely interchangeable shack restaurants serving up fresh seafood right on the beach. Prices are fairly reasonable, and reservations are rarely necessary, even in the best joints. The largest **supermarket** is El Batey's Supermercado Playero, on the Carretera 5 at the eastern El Batey town entrance (daily 8.30am–6pm), but you'll find far cheaper groceries in the many small shops of Los Charamicos. Playero, which has a smaller branch on Pedro Clisante, also offers fresh French bread and various Euro delicacies aimed at the local expat community. Super Super Surf Liquors (closed Sun), on the corner of 16 de Agosto and Pedro Clisante, should cater to most tastes in alcohol.

El Batey

Bogey's Pica Pollo Pedro Clisante. Thriving local cafeteria packed to the gills at lunchtime offering tasty, inexpensive Dominican staples to eat in or take out. Open until 4pm; closed Sun.

Café Cubano Pedro Clisante and Libre. This neat, nicely tiled café-bar offering only a handful of tables provides a touch of sophistication along this often tacky strip. Breakfasts are great, and they also serve decent sandwiches, cakes, waffles and the like, all for under RD$200. Let the Cuban rum flow in the evening. Closed Sun.

Casa Mofongo 16 de agosto. Dominican owned, with a Dominican chef, this intimate patio restaurant (plus indoor seating with a/c) specializes in inexpensive variations of its namesake, *mofongo* – mashed fried plantain with garlic and pork rinds – with beef, chicken, shrimp or conch and a complimentary soup. Otherwise, try the reasonably priced seafood dishes. Open from 2pm; closed Sun.

La Dolce Vita Alejo Martínez and Duarte. This authentic Italian ice-cream parlour is the perfect place to stop off after a day at the beach. Profiteroles, tiramisu and great coffee with whipped cream provide further calorific temptations. Free wi-fi.

La Finca Alejo Martínez 18 ☎571-3825. One of Sosúa's top gourmet choices, the twenty-year-old *La Finca* serves welcome variations on typical tropical fare – stewed goat in rum sauce, tuna with lemongrass and capers, grouper with saffron for RD$360 – in an elegant dining room set in an antique building. Closed Mon.

Moru Mai Pedro Clisante 5 ☎571-2966. Decent international fare in a smartly decorated diner. The chic and convivial atmosphere makes it popular, although it's not cheap – expect to pay RD$495 for shrimp with saffron rice. Sumptuous breakfasts are available earlier in the day (8am–3pm) for around RD$225.

On the Waterfront Dr Rosén 1 ☎571-3024. Terrific seafood restaurant on a sweeping oceanfront patio; choose from fresh lobster, red snapper, sea bass, grouper and calamari while soaking up the view. Not as pretentious as *La Puntilla* but just as good and one notch less expensive. Free wi-fi and live music on Saturday evenings.

PJ's Duarte and Clisante. A popular, relaxed burger joint located on the busiest corner in town. The outdoor patio is particularly good for people watching.

La Puntilla de Piergiorgio La Puntilla 1. Sosúa's best-known restaurant is set along a series of grand waterfront patios with fountains, affording jaw-dropping sunsets and spectacular views across to Mount Isabela. Seafood dishes are usually the best choice, particularly the lobster, though there's a good range of salads and vegetarian options. It's the dearest place in town, averaging around RD$2000 per person for a meal with drinks.

La Roca Duarte and Clisante. Good Dominican seafood restaurant with reasonable prices and where you can get fresh grilled lobster and shrimp prepared seven different ways.

Los Charamicos and Playa Sosúa

Andres Playa Sosúa. At the western end of the beach, this relatively large venue cooks up great mounds of reasonably priced fish and seafood on a large open-air grill. The *salpicón de mariscos* (RD$2 200) – seafood taster plate – is a good bet if you're in a group. Eat either standing at the bar or on the beach.

Michael's Arzeno, at beach entrance. This good, inexpensive seafood spot is frequented mostly by locals, with a pleasant, low-key atmosphere and,

perched on a clifftop, great views of the beach. Fish-of-the-day specials are good value.
Scandinavian Bar Playa Sosúa 152. One of the better open-air beach bar-restaurants (food until 6pm), with a constant flow of reggae and inexpensive, well-prepared seafood and pasta dishes plus a hefty dollop of German specialities. Closed Mon.

Drinking and nightlife

Most of Sosúa's nightlife, from ear-throbbing clubs and open-air discos to replica British pubs, is aimed squarely at expats. Many also cater to male holidaymakers on the lookout for a little more than a drink and a dance. Prostitution is fairly mainstream in Sosúa, which at least makes it easy to spot the places you should avoid, although do be aware that "business" takes place in almost all the city's nightspots to some extent, including the large **casino** adjoining the *Sosúa Bay Hotel* at the west end of Pedro Clisante.

Bar Gri Gri Playa Sosúa. A great little beach bar set amid a clutch of similar establishments in the centre of Playa Sosúa. A major meeting point, with shady seating under nearby trees. Open until 7pm.
Bar Jack's Playa Sosúa. Slightly less basic than most of its competitors, *Jack's* offers a good range of drinks as well as seating on the beach. Open until 6pm; closed Mon.
Brittania Pub Clisante and Libre. Rowdy, narrow English pub catering to tourists; somewhat nondescript, but still a decent place for a few drinks. Living up to its name, it provides such British culinary delights as fish 'n' chips and eggs, beans and chips for very little.
Club 59 Clisante and Dr Rosén. Outdoor dancefloor, meat market and bar with a first-floor terrace from which to watch the action. Things don't get hopping until after 2am.
Jolly Roger Clisante. Catering unashamedly to the local resorts' knees-up crowds, this tacky pirate-themed bar has extended happy hours every day from noon–8pm and karaoke on Fri and is frequently swinging. Pub grub sold for under RD$200 helps absorb the alcohol. Wi-fi.
Jungle Juiced Playa Sosúa 147. Nice outdoor bar/shack on the main beach with ice-cold beer and mixed drinks, including a tasty but incredibly strong rum punch that enhances the beach-going experience considerably. You can order food from the neighbouring stalls.
Latinos Club Clisante between Duarte and Dr Rosén. Largest dancehall in town, but mostly a centre for sex tourism. High-octane merengue and strong mixed drinks.
Rocky's Dr Rosén 22 Ⓣ571-2951, Ⓦwww.rockysbar.com. Friendly, always jam-packed local hangout popular with expats, dishing up great burgers, generous slabs of barbecued ribs and ice-cold beer. Mama Juana shots (a Dominican aphrodisiac) are offered to those really hoping to make a night of it. They also have cheap, no-frills rooms across from the bar (see p.181).
Típico Azúcar Calle Príncipe, Pueblo Monte Llano. Located 10km west of town, just off the Carretera 5 in the town of Monte Llano, this friendly rural Dominican *típico* disco is frequented by field hands and factory workers after a hard day's labour. A perfect place to see how people in the pueblos kick back.

Listings

Banks and currency exchange There are branches of Banco Popular and Banco Progreso on Martínez and Pedro Clisante, respectively. Both have 24hr ATM machines. If looking to change money on weekends, there are a number of storefront exchanges on Duarte and Pedro Clisante.
Car rental Best bets are the international companies located at the airport, although there are a few reliable agencies in town, including Freddy's (Ⓣ571-3146), Kobi Rent (Ⓣ571-1578), X-Trem (Ⓣ571-3220) and the especially cheap *Pensión Anneliese* (Ⓣ571-2208).
Emergency Dial Ⓣ911.
Internet There are several wi-fi hotspots: *Rockys*, *On the Waterfront*, *La Dolce Vita* and the *Caribe Internet Café*, on Duarte offering access for RD$60 an hour on modern, fast machines, plus photocopying.
Laundry Family Laundry (Mon–Sat 8am–6pm, until 3pm on Sun) on the road down to *On the Waterfront* will do a load for around RD$300.
Medical Servi-Med, Beach Rd, El Batey (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm & 24hr emergency; Ⓣ571-0964).
Pharmacy Super Farmacia Sosúa, Pedro Clisante (Mon–Sat 8am–7pm).

Police The police station is at the entrance to El Batey, across the street from the Texaco station.

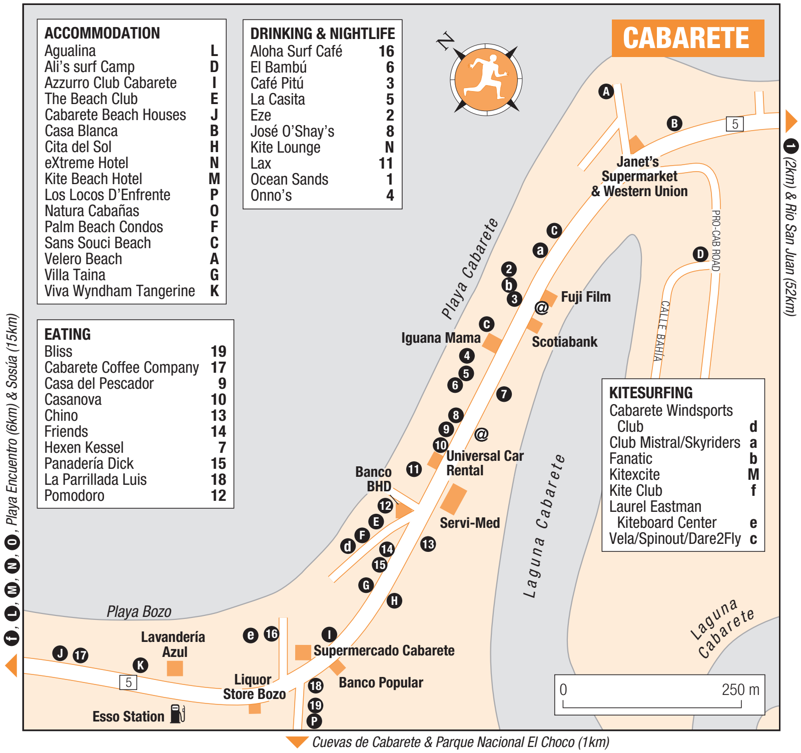
Post office Instead of chancing the main office's erratic service, head to EPS, Sosúa Business Services, Pedro Clisante 12 (☎ 571-3451).

Telephone Codetel's offices are located in El Batey at C Martínez and in Los Charamicos next to Caribe Tours on the C-5, at the entrance to the barrio. Mobile phones can be rented from the Orange office in the Plaza Colonia on Martínez (☎ 571-4081, ⓔ info@netservice-dr.com). International calls can also be made at the *Caribe Internet Café*.

Tour operators Mel Tours in Beachway Plaza (☎ 571-2057, ⓦ www.mel-tour.com) offers catamaran tours of the coast, horse- and even camel-riding, river rafting, Puerto Plata city tours, whale watching and more.

Cabarete

Stretched along the C-5 between the beach and lagoon that bear its name, **CABARETE** is a crowded international enclave that owes its existence almost entirely to **windsurfing** and kiteboarding. There was no town to speak of in 1984 when legendary windsurfer Jean Laporte discovered the area's near-perfect windsurf conditions (see box, p.186). The town quickly became a haven for sculpted surf bums debating the nuances of gear between death-defying feats, a scene that was augmented exponentially when **kiteboarding** became part of the mix in 2000 – it has now gone on to become the area's dominant watersport. The multicultural cross-section of aficionados of the sports has attracted a growing


CABARETE
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Banco BHD
Servi-Med
Supermercado Cabarete
Banco Popular
Lavandería Azul
Liquor Store Bozo
Esso Station
0 250 m
1 (2km) & Río San Juan (52km)
f, L, M, N, O, Playa Encuentro (6km) & Sosúa (15km)
Cuevas de Cabarete & Parque Nacional El Choco (1km)

ACCOMMODATION	
Agualina	L
Ali's surf Camp	D
Azzurro Club Cabarete	I
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Cabarete Beach Houses	J
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eXtreme Hotel	N
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Casa del Pescador	9
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Pomodoro	12

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El Bambú	6
Café Pitú	3
La Casita	5
Eze	2
José O'Shay's	8
Kite Lounge	N
Lax	11
Ocean Sands	1
Onno's	4

KITESURFING	
Cabarete Windsports Club	d
Club Mistral/Skyriders	a
Fanatic	b
Kitexcite	M
Kite Club	f
Laurel Eastman Kiteboard Center	e
Vela/Spinout/Dare2Fly	c

Windsurfing and kiteboarding

The conditions for **windsurfing** in Cabarete are so perfect that the whole bay could have been designed specifically with this in mind. The trade winds normally blow from the east, meaning that they sweep across the bay from right to left allowing easy passage both out to the offshore reefs and back to the beach. Downwind, the waters lap onto the amusingly named **Bozo Beach**, which will catch anybody unfortunate to have a mishap. The offshore reef provides plenty of surf for the experts who ride the waves, performing tricks and some spectacular jumps. The reef also shelters the inshore waters so that on all but the roughest of winter days the waters remain calm. The morning winds are little more than a gentle breeze and this, coupled with the flat water, makes the bay ideal for beginners, especially in summer when the surface can resemble a mirror. Then, as the temperature rises, the trade winds kick in big-time and the real show starts. Take some binoculars if you want to see the action out on the reef.

Two kilometres west of Playa Cabarete, hidden behind Punta Goleta, the white-sand **Kite Beach** has become a massive international hub for **kiteboarding**. In many ways similar to windsurfing, but using a much smaller, more manoeuvrable board and relying on a huge C-shaped kite to provide the power instead of a sail, kiteboarding requires less wind. As a result, the riders travel faster than their windsurfing counterparts, allowing them to perform huge jumps and tricks that would be impossible with a sail. Its spectacular nature has greatly boosted its popularity and in recent years kiteboarding has taken over from windsurfing as the pre-eminent watersport throughout Cabarete – everything between Kite Beach and Bozo Beach is now pretty much taken up by the sport. And in the third week of June, Kite Beach plays host to the prestigious Kiteboarding World Cup. Meanwhile, good old-fashioned **surfing** has become increasingly popular, especially along Playa Encuentro west of town.

There are windsurf and kiteboard **schools** strung right along the beach. They have a confusing array of pricing structures but there's not really much difference between them. The choices come down to the actual make (rather than quality) of equipment, the amount of gear in stock (important mainly during busier times like Christmas–New Year and July–August), the launch position on the beach, and the languages spoken by the staff. Nonetheless, there can be differences in the weight and age of the boards, masts and booms, so if you haven't booked in advance you should check two or three out and see what equipment they have available, especially in high season.

community of people from across the globe, which has in turn attracted hotel chains and an assortment of adventure sports outfits. In fact, it's hard for return visitors to believe how quickly Cabarete has blossomed. The website Ⓦwww.activecabarete.com provides useful information and weblinks for the full range of the town's outdoor activities.

Today "Cabarete" spans 4km of the highway, with no end to the expansion in sight. A spate of recently built **all-inclusives** has led to the growth of a more traditional brand of tourism, but the clients at these new hotels are generally younger, hipper and more interested in adventure sports than guests at more family-oriented complexes like Playa Dorada. And the open, accessible layout of the town prevents it from having the closed-off atmosphere of other Dominican tourist enclaves.

Arrival and city transport

Virtually all of Cabarete is on the **Carretera 5**. Taxis, guaguas and *motoconchos* will all drop you off along the main strip, a crowded patchwork of restaurants, bars,

Schools and equipment rental

Cabarete Windsports Club ⓣ571-0784, ⓦwww.cabaretewindsportsclub.com. A small and friendly centre just in front of the *Villa Taina*, with which it is affiliated. The clientele is mainly German, but English, French and Italian are spoken as well. Very personalized and good for families, they'll even take beginners onto a lagoon to start. US$150 for three sessions windsurfing (1.5–3hr depending on group size) on the water and US$230 for the same time kiteboarding; US$50 equipment rental.

Club Mistral/Skyriders ⓣ571-0770 or 9791, ⓦwww.club-mistral.com. A well-stocked centre with great staff at the eastern end of Cabarete beach that benefits from being part of a large international company.

Fanatic ⓣ571-0861, ⓦwww.fanatic-cabarete.com. Small, friendly operation that gives students a lot of personal attention and has a nice beach bar serving tasty cocktails. Lesson in surfing (3hr US$41), kiteboarding in small groups of 2–3 (2hr lesson US$83) or windsurfing (5hr over several days US$177). Spanish lessons also on offer.

Kite Club ⓣ571-9748, ⓦwww.kiteclubcabarete.com. Well-organized IKO-affiliated club, which also runs instructors' courses, and has a lively club (membership from US$20/week) and café on the beach. A three-day beginner's package (9 hours) costs US$382 (in a group of two).

Kitexcite ⓣ571-9509, ⓦwww.kitexcite.com. One of the original kiteboard schools on Kite Beach, and part of the *Kite Beach Hotel*. German-run but staff who can teach in English, French, Spanish, Russian or Italian. US$280 for an 8hr beginner's course, slightly more for a course using radio helmets to give instant feedback on your performance on the waves.

Laurel Eastman Kiteboard Center *Apart-Hotel Caracol* ⓣ571-0564, ⓦwww.laureleastman.com. School founded by a legendary female kitesurfer who does the best job of training newbies, with four-day private courses for US$460 and four-day group lessons for US$425.

Vela/Spinout/Dare2Fly ⓣ571-0805, ⓦwww.velacabarete.com. German-owned and the best-stocked of Cabarete's windsurf centres with free daily clinics and a lively social scene at the adjoining bar. US$255 for a week's kiteboarding equipment rental. Their Dare2Fly station on Kite Beach offers equipment rental and lessons daily. US$390 for a three-day introductory course with equipment.

tour operators and surf shops. If travelling to and from Santo Domingo, Caribe Tours and Metro are only a short guagua ride away in Sosúa (see p.179).

The exponential growth of visitors has led to hotels cropping up for over 1km on either side of the main strip, the furthest ones being accessible from the main town via cheap and omnipresent *motoconchos*. You should never have to pay more than RD$30 during the day to get from an outlying hotel to the main strip, RD$60 at night. Playa Cabarete stretches out across the length of existing development, with a row of lively outdoor restaurants and bars at the centre.

Accommodation

Cabarete has a bewildering variety of **accommodation**, including small pensiones, several good mid-range choices, a number of apart-hotels and a few all-inclusives. Increasingly popular are the condominium rental complexes, particularly on the west side of town as many allow you to launch your kiteboard directly off the beachfront and the prices are still comparatively reasonable for the Caribbean. The oldest, most established hotels lie in the town centre (which is also where you'll find the best restaurants and bars); a run of condos and newer all-inclusives line Punta Goleta at the western edge of the main strip; and another spate of new hotels has sprung up around Kite Beach, 2km west of town. Regardless of location, it's advisable to book ahead.

Main strip

Cita del Sol Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0720, ⓦwww.citadelsol.com. A hidden gem, far enough away from the road to cut out most of the chaos and yet near several restaurants. Good-sized. recently refurbished one-bedroom apartments with kitchens and a pleasant pool area. Around US$220 per week. ③

Palm Beach Condos Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0758, ⓦwww.cabaretecondos.com. Right in the middle of the action on the beach with full-service apartments sleeping four (private patios with sea views) and smaller (and cheaper) studios with kitchenettes. All tastefully furnished and with high-speed internet, set round a lovely tropical garden and pool. A minimum stay of a week is required during peak periods. ⑥

Villa Taina Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0722, ⓦwww.villataina.com. A restful choice with helpful staff, great ambience and a selection of clean, tidy rooms, apparently designed along the principles of Feng Shui, with all mod cons (and some with balconies and sea views). Quiet beachside restaurant. Lots of activities, including canyoning, horse-riding, sunset cruising (and, of course, kiteboarding) are offered. Rates include breakfast. ⑦

West of the main strip

Agualina Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0805, ⓦwww.agualina.com. Nice full-service apartments right on Kite Beach, with an in-house kiteboarding school (Dare2Fly). Unlike similar places, the apartments are not only spacious (the biggest have three bedrooms and sleep up to six) and comfortable, they're also stylishly done. Highly recommended if you're going to spend most of your time on Kite Beach. ⑥

Cabarete Beach Houses Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0744, ⓦwww.cabaretebeachhouses.com. Excellent-value high-end accommodation, especially if you're with a group: these two-storey apartments, 1km west of Cabarete's core, boast two huge bedrooms, a spacious lounge and well-equipped kitchens, but what makes them really stand out are the rooftop sundecks (with shower) affording great sea views. Located on a quiet section of beach with a private pool and a tennis court. ⑦

eXtreme Hotel Carretera 5 at Kite Beach ⓣ571-0880, ⓦwww.extremehotels.com. Comfortable adventure-sports hotel right on Kite Beach, noted for its lively atmosphere – hardly surprising as it's the site of the Caribbean's only underground skatepark. Rooms are deliberately kept basic – no a/c – but have two to three beds to accommodate large groups. Wi-fi available. Minimum-stay two nights, with good rates for long-term stays. ④

Kite Beach Hotel Carretera 5 at Kite Beach ⓣ571-0878, ⓦwww.kitebeachhotel.com. Large Kite Beach hotel with its own kiteboarding school, Kitexcite. A mixture of reasonably decorated rooms and apartments, some with a/c. The older rooms are cheaper. Big discounts for long-term stays. ⑤

Los Locos d'Enfrente Callejón de la Loma ⓣ879-6151. Choice, budget Swiss-run guesthouse and steakhouse with seven very basic, spotless, tiled rooms. No fan or a/c but large windows with mosquito screens and hot water. You pay slightly more for the larger, quieter rooms. ②

Natura Cabañas Carretera 5, 5km west of town within the *Perla Marina* gated community ⓣ571-1507, ⓦwww.naturacabana.com. Secluded complex with ten tastefully decorated bungalows (some with kitchens), crafted out of stone, wood and thatch set among tropical gardens backing onto a private beach (though strong currents preclude swimming). On site there's a spa, yoga pavilion and excellent restaurant. The place markets itself as the "eco alternative", but in fact offers just a slightly more rustic (and pricier) version of what's available in Cabarete Town. Still, it's a great place to get away from it all. ⑧

Viva Wyndham Tangerine Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0402, ⓦwww.vivaresorts.com. One of the biggest and best all-inclusives here, following the standard Viva template with 273 large rooms (with minibars and terraces), three restaurants, boundless activities and easy beach access. ⑧

East of the main strip

Ali's Surf Camp (Cabarete Surf Camp) Pro-Cab Rd ⓣ548-6655, ⓦwww.alissurfcamp.com. Friendly backpackers-style surf camp set on the lagoon (so be prepared for mosquitoes when the wind drops), with free use of rowing boat and paddleboards for guests. Lodgings are varied but all cheerily decorated, from simple, single fan-ventilated rooms with mosquito nets, sinks, storage space and shared washing facilities (US$35 half board) to a fully equipped "Tarzan house" sleeping six (US$100) with rooms, studios and apartments in between. The lovely tropical grounds contain a small pool, sun loungers and a communal thatched bar-restaurant, which provides set menus including vegetarian dishes and is a prime spot for meeting fellow travellers. Rates include breakfast and dinner. ⑤

Casa Blanca Carretera 5 ⓣ571-0934, ⓦwww.casablancacabarete.com. Solid mid-range option just off the beach, comprising nine studios with kitchenettes and seven spacious but sparse rooms (no TV or a/c) though you can use the communal kitchen and dining area for an extra US$3 per day and there's a modest but pleasant pool area where breakfast is served. Free gear storage and good kite- and windsurfing package deals available. ④

Sans Souci Beach Carretera 5, east side of main strip ⓣ571-0613, ⓦwww.hotel-sans-souci.com. The best of the properties – some offering rooms for as little as US$30 per night – run by this German-owned chain in Cabarete, offering a decent standard of mid-range comfort with large, if slightly worn-looking, apartments (a choice of one- or two-bedroom, all with kitchens and balconies, some with sea views) on the beachfront. Guests can use the facilities of the other properties. ④

Velero Beach Carretera 5 ⓣ571-9727, ⓦwww.velerobeach.com. The town's swishest choice, the *Velero* is a very attractive hotel with large, luxuriously equipped rooms (all with oceanfront balconies and high-speed internet access), plus some even larger two-bedroom suites, which come with kitchens and can accommodate a family of six. Attentive service, a gorgeous infinity pool, a top-notch restaurant and tropical gardens (with four-poster sun loungers) complete the picture. ⑧

The town

What there is of a town consists of the hectic and rapidly expanding strip of restaurants and hotels stretching out along the C-5 for well over 4km just behind

Cabarete adventure sports

Cabwake Wakeboard School ⓣ866-3929, ⓦwww.cabwake.com. 6km east of Cabarete on the Río Islabon. You can book a 20min tow on the river's glassy warm waters for US$35, or consider a half-day package for US$85, including lunch and hotel transfer.

Dolphin Dive Center ⓣ571-0842, ⓦwww.dolphindivecenter.com. Well-established scuba-diving school offering three-day PADI Open Water instruction for US$320 and a variety of dives on local reefs and wrecks for US$36–46/dive, including equipment.

Fun Tours ⓣ571-0250. Small local operator next to Iguana Mama (and taking some of their overspill) offering a variety of local tours, including a jeep safari to the Damajagua cascades (see p.178; US$35), horse riding (US$35), deep-sea fishing (US$55) and river rafting (US$59).

Iguana Mama ⓣ571-0908, ⓦwww.iguanamama.com. The very best of the country's adventure operators, with imaginative tours; well-trained, well-informed and friendly staff; and an enviable ethical eco tourism record. They offer a huge selection of US$58–87 mountain-bike day-trips, suitable for all levels of rider and fitness, as well as week-long adventure tours of the island, hikes up Mount Isabela (US$87; see p.172) and multi-day treks through the Cordillera Central to Pico Duarte (US$522). They also rent out quality mountain bikes for US$25/day and offer horse-riding for US$55/half-day. Transport from your hotel is not necessarily included.

Kayak River Adventures ⓣ829/305-6883, ⓦwww.kayakriveradventures.com. Relaxing half-day (US$49) or full-day (US$79) excursions down the Río Yásica, offering an opportunity to swim there too. Overnight camping can also be arranged. Enquire online or through Iguana Mama.

Laser Training Centre ⓣ571-0640, ⓦwww.caribwind.com. The place to learn to sail, boasting three Beijing Olympic medallists on the team. Courses held for all levels: beginner and intermediate sailors can have three 2hr sessions at US$360 per person, or US$300 for private tuition. Weekly and monthly packages are available for advanced sailors.

the water. The main Dominican barrio set back towards the lagoon, along the road to the national park and on the eastern perimeters along a road known as **Pro-Cab**. As you'd expect from a town that grew up on surfing, the beach, **Playa Cabarete**, is where the real action is. Here, and at Kite Beach, 2km west of town, kitesurfers, windsurfers and sun-worshippers rule the shoreline. Between the two, and a little further out to the east, you'll find more peace and quiet.

Laguna Cabarete

Behind the town to the south is **El Choco National Park**, a lush green wilderness that contains the lovely **Laguna Cabarete**, home to thousands of birds, but surrounded by dense brush and somewhat hard to get around. The park also holds the **Caves of Cabarete**, a set of holes around the lagoon that have been fenced off and illuminated with electric light. There's a park entrance down a well-marked turnoff just west of town, where you will be assigned a guide (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm; US$5) to the caves and lagoon. You'll see a few "Arawak glyphs", though twentieth-century graffiti is more prominent than Taino art, and have the opportunity to swim in an underground pool.

Eating

Cabarete has an array of good **dining** options, the impressive range thanks to the largely expat ownership. Indeed, outside of Santo Domingo and Las Terrenas, Cabarete may have the best French and Italian food available in the Dominican Republic. Even with all of these choices, though, a pilgrimage to the wonderful nearby Indian restaurant *Blue Moon* (see p.193) is a must when in town. Those with kitchenettes should head for groceries at Janet's **Supermarket**, which is next door to the *Casa Blanca* resort at the east end of the downtown strip.

At night, the bars and restaurants spill out onto the **sand**, making for a superb dining scene at both Playa Cabarate and Kite Beach, where you can eat at a quality restaurant with sand between your toes and the sound of the sea as background music. It also gets pretty lively later as many of the bars take on the role of discos and clubs.

Bliss Callejón de la Loma 5 ☎865-6444. Tropical takes on French staples – lobster with pastis, pork in coffee sauce, etc – in a very elegant, though pricey, courtyard dining space next to a swimming pool, just back from the road.

Cabarete Coffee Company Carretera 5 ⓦwww.cabaretecoffeecompany.com. Inexpensive (all dishes under RD$200), no-frills café using locally grown or organic ingredients where possible. All-day breakfasts range from healthy bowls of yoghurt, fruit and granola to the less healthy, but just as tasty, waffles with whipped cream. Delicious, inventive salads and deli sandwiches are just the ticket for lunch with the peanut butter and jelly panini an unlikely hit. Don't miss out on the fabulous mural in the toilet. Join one of their day-trips to the estates where they source their organic coffee and cocoa. Daily until 3pm.

Casa del Pescador Carretera 5 ☎571-0760. The best seafood in town, where you can pick the lobster of your choice from the pool at the front (or just watch the startled faces of the passers-by). The plastic chairs make it look cheaper than it is – expect to pay around RD$500–700 for mains and around RD$2200 for the monster seafood platter. Surf and turf options also available.

Casanova Carretera 5 ☎963-0295. Dinner here is good and of a consistently high standard, but not exactly cheap (Thai red chicken curry RD$500; goat's cheese and walnut salad RD$420). The setting is lovely with an elegant indoor dining space leading from the road to the beach where flaming torches illuminate the tables. Closed Mon.

Chino Carretera 5 ☎571-0972. Cabarete's only Chinese restaurant is a winner, with dim sum, shrimp fried rice and moo shoo pork. The preparations are healthier and less salt-infused than what you'll find elsewhere on the island. Quite cheap, with take away service available.

Friends Carretera 5. Next door to *Panadería Dick*, this nice breakfast and lunch spot serves hearty sandwiches, salads and fruit shakes. Great fresh muffins, cookies and banana pancakes too, as well as free wi-fi.

Hexen Kessel Carretera 5. Restaurant-cum-meeting place, open 24hr, that's a little bit more rough and ready than its beachfront counterparts. You sit at picnic-style tables ordering from a long blackboard featuring German specials (such as schnitzel or sausages), as well as burgers and pizza. Open-sided, making it the best people-watching spot in town.

Panadería Dick Carretera 5. Just the smell of this place will give you a new lease of life, with various gourmet breads for a few pesos, great Danishes and croissants as good as those in Paris. They also have fresh-squeezed orange juice and cappuccinos that taste like French *café crème*. Closed evenings and Wed.

Parillada Luis On the corner of C-5 and Callejón de la Loma. Popular with locals and budget-conscious surfers as you can get a decent plateful of barbecued chicken and salad with rice, chips or yucca plus an ice-cold beer for RD$150. Daily from 3pm.

Pomodoro Carretera 5 ☎571-0085. This is a very good pizzeria with a warm ambience, serving over 30 types from the RD$180 Margherita to the RD$420 special (mozzarella, gorgonzola, parmesan and prosciutto) under an awning on the beach with live jazz on Thurs.

Drinking and nightlife

As the sun starts to set, the happy-hour bar crawls begin. Cabarete is packed with **bars**, but only those with the prime beachfront locations garner the majority of the business. **Live music** is occasionally staged at *Lax* and *José O'Shays*, and every November Cabarete provides some of the venues for the annual Dominican Republic Jazz Festival (ⓦwww.drjazzfestival.com).

Aloha Surf Café Just off Playa Bozo, at the entrance to Ocean 1. As the name suggests, a popular watering hole for surfers, whose good food also attracts a fair number of residents from the nearby condos. Thurs is BBQ night with an all-you-can-eat buffet and Fri there is live music. Closed Mon and Tues.

El Bambú Playa Cabarete. Large, thatched-roof beach bar that serves simple pasta and tapas dishes during the day and turns into a heaving dance-fest from around 10pm.

Café Pitú Carretera 5. This relaxed, friendly beach café does a mean chicken enchilada and lays on themed evening entertainment throughout the week: Latin nights on Mon; 2-for-1 pizzas on Tues; reggae nights on Thurs (with "rasta pasta" for RD$89). Wi-fi hotspot.

La Casita Playa Cabarete. Easy to overlook, this little stand-up bar between *Onno's* and *El Bambú* serves the cheapest drinks on the beach – RD$70 for a *Cuba libre*. From 6pm.

Eze Playa Cabarete, in front of Carib Bic Center. Mellow beachfront bar/eatery offering California wraps, smoothies and fresh fruit juice in the day. When the sun goes down, it's time for laidback nightlife by torchlight.

José O'Shay's Carretera 5. Irish theme bar that tries the hardest to get the party started. Regular events include live music, discos and big-screen sports on the beach. It also has Guinness on tap. Attracts a dedicated North American crowd.

Kite Lounge *eXtreme Hotel*, Kite Beach. Usually packed with kitesurfers chilling and watching other kitesurfers performing their tricks, while sipping a smoothie or a beer, or enjoying a game of table tennis. Inexpensive breakfast and lunch served, though the cocktails are pricier. Daily until 7pm.

Lax Carretera 5. The most popular place to come both early evening, when it serves a pretty decent bar menu (various happy hours for different drinks), and again in the early hours when everything is winding down. Relaxed and loaded with rows of couches under sail-like awnings on the sand looking out over the sea. Occasionally hosts live music.

Ocean Sands Carretera 5, east of main strip. The *Ocean Sands* is always crowded on Fri & Sat nights after 2am when a top-name DJ blends the music although a good portion of the patrons will, inevitably, be drunk. Still, this large disco set above a casino can be quite good fun, notwithstanding its generic music and decor. The "gentleman's club" on the premises ensures that the sex trade is omnipresent. Daily from 8pm.

Onno's Carretera 5. Lively bar/restaurant, on the beachfront in the centre of the strip, that gets going in the small hours, playing mainly European and American hits. They also have pretty good food, including pizzas, seared tuna fillet and seafood linguini.

Listings

Banks and currency exchange The following banks have ATMs in the centre of town: Banco Popular, Banco Progreso, Banco BHD and Scotiabank. Additional ATMs are at the Esso and Texaco petrol stations to the west and east of town respectively. There are also dozens of local exchange booths; best exchange rates at Western Union.

Car and motorcycle rental Reputable car rental outfits include Mauri Moto Rentals (☎571-0666) and Universal (☎571-0462). Motorcycles and scooters can be rented from Easy Rider (☎571-0825) from US$20 a day.

Internet There are several internet cafés on the main road and places like *Friends*, *Café Pitú* are wi-fi hotspots. The going rate is RD$60/hour.

Laundry Just about every hotel has laundry service. Lavandería Azul (8.30am–5.30pm, closed Sun) at the west end of town, next to the *Viva Wyndham Tangerine*, does laundry for RD$300/load.

Medical Servi-Med, Carretera 5 (☎571-0964; open 24hr), is a terrific medical service plus dentist and chiropractor. Cabarete Medical Centre is a new 24hr state-of-the-art institution on the way to Sosúa (☎571-4403, Ⓦwww.cabaretemedicalcenter.com).

Post office There's no post office, but Fuji Film (see map p.185) has a private postal service for RD$60.

Telephone There are small TeleVimenca and Tricom shops in the town centre.

Around Cabarete

Undeveloped **Playa Encuentro**, 6km west of Cabarete on the C-5 has massive waves – of the sort unseen in most of the DR – which attract a good number of surfers and a handful of highly skilled, clearly suicidal **kitesurfers**. It's worth stopping off between 6am and 8am to watch the most daring of them ride atop 6m waves, execute 360-degree leaps and even ride within the curl of the waves on the rare occasions when the surf is large enough to allow it. Every March the Encuentro Classic takes place here, one of the top-rated surfing competitions in the world. To reach Playa Encuentro, hop on the back of a *motoconcho* (RD$50) or take a guagua (RD$15) as far as the *Coconut Palms Resort*, then walk to the beach, 1.5km down a paved road.

The main attraction in the surrounding countryside is the mountain-biking trail along the old **El Choco** road, which was once used to truck bananas from the countryside to the coast but is now little more than a dirt path. Iguana Mama's

Surfing at Playa Encuentro

Playa Encuentro is a haven of surf schools that run out of small wooden huts variously serving as offices, storerooms, repair workshops and/or snack bars. Lessons are generally around US$45 for a two-hour class, US$100–120 for a five-day camp but check whether board rental is included, and ask around for who has the best instructors and rates. Surfboard rental costs US$20–30/day, or US$110–150/week. The more established schools are:

Buena Onda ☎829/877-0768, Ⓦwww.cabaretebuenaonda.com. Fairly new outfit providing lessons and rental that also organizes excursions to Playa Grande and Playa Preciosa. Transport to and from the beach is an extra US$5.

Cabarete Surf Camp ☎571-0733, Ⓦwww.cabaretesurfcamp.com. The camp offers some of the cheapest rates and provides showers at the beach, transport to and from town (included in lesson prices) and offers weekly surf trips to other beaches. Their accommodation is at *Ali's Surf Camp* by the lagoon.

Take Off ☎963-7873, Ⓦwww.321.takeoff.com. Longstanding surf school that runs lessons for all standards. Also organizes the Master of the Ocean Triathlon every February (a competition involving surfing, windsurfing and kiteboarding).

(see p.189) half-day **mountain-bike excursion** down El Choco is a fairly challenging trip but a great way to experience the wonderful scenery, catching glimpses of rural life. A more leisurely way to appreciate and learn about the countryside and its population is to go **horse-riding**, which is easily organized through several tour companies or through your hotel in Cabarete or Sosúa, though you can also book directly with several local ranches. Rancho Veragua (Ⓦwww.ranchoveragua.com; US$55) offers a choice of a mountain-based or beach-based half-day tour, both including the chance to swim, and with the option of ordering a traditional Dominican lunch back at the ranch for an extra US$5. Rancho Montana (Ⓦwww.ranchomontana.com) is another favourite.

Sabaneta de Yásica and around

SABANETA DE YÁSICA, a few kilometres southeast of Cabarete, is a nondescript concrete town at the junction of the Río Yásica – a large river with little development along it – and the Atlantic. Islabón Jungle River Tours, just northwest of town (Ⓣ248-2818; US$45), operates a **rainforest eco-tour** that takes small groups of passengers up a tributary of the Yásica to the large Laguna Islabón, then turns back along the Yásica to the river's mouth. This 2hr 30min ride leads through otherwise impossible-to-access, dense rainforest and mangrove swamp, home to an enormous variety of orchids, tropical birds and reptiles. It's also a lovely river to glide down in a kayak (see box, p.189).

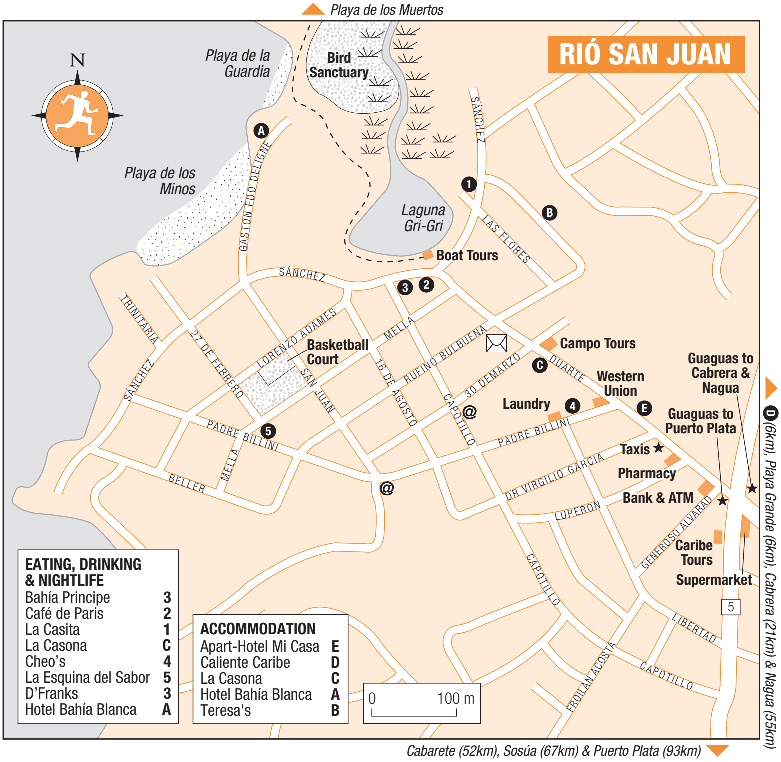
South from Sabaneta de Yásica, the **Sabaneta–Moca road** winds through the heart of the Cordillera Septentrional past a number of relatively prosperous agricultural pueblos. At pueblo Los Brazos, the *Blue Moon Retreat* (Ⓣ571-0614, Ⓦwww.bluemoonretreat.net; ④) is an isolated mountaintop compound, with four brightly decorated cabins scattered around a swimming pool. If you're looking for restful mountain scenery, this is a great place to spend a few nights. Even more notable is their unique restaurant, which serves multiple courses of delicious gourmet Indian food on banana leaves. Diners sit cross-legged on the floor on mats and cushions in an expansive tent. Reservations, which are for the whole evening, have to be made at least three days in advance, and they only serve parties of eight or more people; if short of the requisite number, see if you can piggyback onto another party (try at Iguana Mama or any of the windsurfing schools). The meal is RD$740 (or US$20) a head and you will need to arrange return transport from Cabarete – usually around US$40.

Río San Juan

The small, friendly fishing village of **RÍO SAN JUAN**, 5km east of La Yagua, borders a large mangrove lagoon, **Laguna Gri-Gri**, as well as being in reach of several great **beaches**, including **Playa Caletón**, **Playa Grande** and **Playa Preciosa**. Although development has taken place around the village over the past decade, it has remained little changed; its tree-lined streets, easy-going atmosphere and simple reliance on boat building, fishing and dairy farming come as a welcome change from the resort bustle to the west.

Arrival and information

The transport hub is around the **Texaco station** on the corner of the C-5 and Calle Duarte at the main entrance into town. Caribe Tours has an office there and operates both a stopping and an express service to and from Santo Domingo (nine


RIÓ SAN JUAN
Playa de los Muertos
N
Playa de la Guardia
Bird Sanctuary
Playa de los Minos
Laguna Gri-Gri
Boat Tours
Basketball Court
Campo Tours
Western Union
Laundry
Guaguas to Cabrera & Nagua
Guaguas to Puerto Plata
Taxis
Pharmacy
Bank & ATM
Caribe Tours
Supermarket
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SÁNCHEZ
GASTON FDO DELIGNE
LAS FLORES
TRINITARIA
27 DE FEBRERO
LORENZO ADAMES
SAN JUAN
MELLA
16 DE AGOSTO
RUFINO BULBUENA
30 DE MARZO
DUARTE
CAPOTILLO
PADRE BILLINI
BELLER
DR VIRGILIO GARCIA
LUPERON
GENEROSO ALVARADO
LIBERTAD
FROILAN ACOSTA
EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE
Bahía Principe 3
Café de Paris 2
La Casita 1
La Casona C
Cheo's 4
La Esquina del Sabor 5
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0 100 m
Cabarete (52km), Sosúa (67km) & Puerto Plata (93km)
D (6km), Playa Grande (6km), Cabrera (21km) & Nagua (55km)

daily; RD$320). The guagua stop for **Nagua** and **Cabrera** is on the east side of the highway by the town's main **supermarket** with transport passing frequently throughout the day. **Guaguas** bound for **Puerto Plata** leave from the end of Calle Duarte just before the highway, travelling via **Cabarete** and **Sosúa**, and run until around 4.30pm for RS$100. *Públicos* do the same trip for RD$75. The main services – **banks**, **ATMs**, **post office** and **pharmacies** – line Calle Duarte.

To book a **taxi** from town to the beaches and resorts, call Taxi Río San Juan (☎589-2501).

Accommodation

There are currently very few places to stay in town though there are a couple of resorts further along the coast. The town lodgings, like everywhere else in Río San Juan, periodically suffer water and electricity cuts.

Apart-hotel Mi Casa Duarte 33 ☎829/221-0339. The cheapest place to stay in town providing dark, Spartan but clean en-suite rooms with serviceable beds, TV and fan (a/c extra). ②

Caliente Caribe Abreu Ⓦwww.calienteresorts.com. Naturist resort with a private beach and the usual all-inclusive amenities. The rooms and facilities are decent but pricey, but if you want to go naked, this is the only place on the island to do it. They get a pretty good mix of North Americans, Europeans and locals, and also offer tennis, hot tubs, volleyball and spa treatments. ⑧

La Casona Duarte and 30 de Marzo. Two spotless good-value rooms above the restaurant with a comfortable double bed, fan, satellite TV and small en-suite bathroom. ②

Hotel Bahía Blanca Deligne ☎589-2562, Ⓔbahia.blanca.dr@codetel.net.do. The main hotel in town boasts an enviable location on a rocky promontory overlooking a small beach and attracts a good mixture of Dominican, European and North American guests. With an appealing yesteryear feel, its fan-ventilated rooms are large and simple (no a/c or TV though there is wi-fi) with faded furnishings but large windows, some offering great ocean views. The restaurant offers an international menu at reasonable prices and tours can be arranged. ④

Teresa's no address; see map, opposite ☎589-2789. Four rooms of varying prices (long-term rates negotiable) in a family home in a quiet residential street near the lagoon, ranging from a tiny double with shared bathroom and fan for RD$500 to a nicely decorated room with en-suite bathroom, a/c and satellite TV. Guests also have access to a rooftop terrace and shared living space with a fridge. Wi-fi available on the ground floor. ②

The Town

The town's main attraction is **Laguna Gri-Gri**, at the northernmost end of Duarte, and it comes as a wonderful surprise, a magnificent mangrove reserve traversed by organized boat tours that you can arrange and board from a small quay at the road's end (☎589-2277). The 2hr tours, which cost RD$1200 per person (for 3 to 6; thereafter, RD$200 per person) head out of the lagoon through the mangroves; go early in the morning if you want to catch more of the birdlife. The boat then enters nearby Cueva de la Golondrina (Swallow's Cave) to admire the stalactites and stalagmites, before heading along the coast to Playa Caletón, where you get to swim. You can also arrange to go snorkelling or fishing for an extra sum. To see the lagoon's birdlife on foot, walk east from the *Hotel Bahía Blanca* to the peninsular bird sanctuary that the tour skirts, which is at its most active just before dusk when hundreds of egrets return to roost. Alternatively take the dirt footpath to the left of the tours office.

Campo Tours is the lone **tour operator** in town, but you'll find better-quality tours, and operators, down the road in Cabarete.

The beaches

Three tiny **beaches**, which pretty much disappear at high tide, are within a 2min walk from town. Two are bisected by the *Hotel Bahía Blanca*; to the west, Playa de Río San Juan, the main town beach, and to the right, Playa de la Guardia, which has a volleyball court. If you follow a 50m track at the end of the sand you reach Playa de los Muertos (so named on account of its proximity to the cemetery). The best sands, however, lie east of town: **Playa Caletón**, a small cove surrounded by rocks and safe for swimming, is the closest and accessible via the marked turnoff along the C-5.

Two kilometres further out, reached by a paved road leading off from the highway, is **Playa Grande**. The area's most spectacular beach, it's a gorgeous and gently sloping stretch of golden sand lapped by deceptively tranquil-looking

Rip-tides

Common on beaches with high surf, **rip-tides** are dangerous ocean conveyor belts that funnel the water being smashed against the coast back to sea. Surfers and windsurfers actually find them desirable, as they pull you effortlessly out to the big waves, but they can pose a life-threatening problem for less experienced swimmers; indeed, at Playa Grande, a couple of people die each year in the tides. If you're not a **strong swimmer**, it's best to keep off beaches with high, crashing surf altogether. You can sometimes – but not always – identify rip-tides by sight as ribbons of sea that don't have any large waves travelling across their surface. At times they'll also have a different colour from the rest of the water. If you're caught in a rip-tide, do not attempt to swim against the powerful current. Instead, swim to the **right** or the **left** – and not directly back to the shore – until you are out of its grip.

Río San Juan scuba diving

Río San Juan offers some of the best dive spots on the north coast, including: **Crab Canyon**, a 26m dive through underwater stone arches; **Natural Pool**, a 15m dive along a great coral reef and into a large cave that looks like a church sanctuary; and **Seven Hills**, a trip that goes 30m down an underwater mountain and makes you feel as if you were flying. Northern Coast Divers in Sosúa (see p.182) runs dive trips to Río San Juan.

green-blue waters and overlooked by swaying palms and cliffs. It's become increasingly popular in recent years, forming a stage on many local tour operators' itineraries, and the parking area is now home to several shack restaurants as well as **vendor stalls** selling souvenirs and rum drinks from coconuts. The cliffs to the west are topped by the Playa Grande golf course – neatly symbolizing encroaching development along this coast – while those to the east protect the pristine **Playa Preciosa**, which, should you manage to negotiate the steep climb down, you will probably have to yourself. Be warned, both beaches are renowned for ferocious **rip-tides** (see box, p.195), so take extra special care when swimming. Playa Grande often has a lifeguard (at its western end); Playa Preciosa does not.

Eating, drinking and nightlife

You'll find a greater selection of places to eat and drink than to sleep here, fuelled in part by the slowly creeping numbers of expats in the area.

Café de Paris Sánchez, opposite the lagoon. French satellite TV and pop videos compete with *D' Franks*' sound system in this café-bar – with the emphasis on "bar" given the dark interior. Enjoy croissants and coffee for breakfast, cocktails and tapas in the evening. With an extensive wine list and free wi-fi.

La Casita Sánchez opposite Las Flores. Cosy, open-sided thatched Italian restaurant serving the usual range of pasta and pizza (most RD$220–330) though it is the beef fillet with mushroom sauce (RD$550) that garners the most support. The cheap beer and wine ensures the place is often full. Evening only; closed Mon.

La Casona Duarte and 30 de Marzo. Traditional Dominican cafeteria with a long sit-down counter and a genial proprietor offering *comida rapida*. Make sure you sample the house speciality, one of their freshly made, crispy *empanadas*; the crab one with vegetables and cheese gets the prize.

Cheo's Padre Billini. Pleasant Dominican café with square tables, tablecloths and artificial flowers, which are at odds with the heavy doses of American rock that accompany the food. A mix of local dishes – the *parillada de mariscos* (RD$1100 between two) being the *chef d'oeuvre* – and international staples attract both locals and tourists. Meat and chicken mains from around RD$360.

D' Franks Sánchez and Capotillio. The roosting egrets in the bird sanctuary opposite have their ear drums sorely tested every night as *D' Franks'* mega sound system blasts forth across the lagoon and the beer flows. The place to dance through the night at weekends, sometimes to live bands.

La Esquina del Sabor Mella, opposite the park. Lively, corner patio restaurant, providing a great spot for people watching as the partying in the park gets going of a weekend. Excellent inexpensive food too: delicious soups, *mondongo*, or fresh fish 'n' chips for only RD$200. Closed Wed.

Hotel Bahía Blanca Deligne ☎ 589-2562. Decent seafood and the usual international favourites served on a terrace overlooking the ocean. Count on paying RD$250 and above for mains.

East to Cabrera

Ten kilometres east of Playa Grande, between the sister towns Abreu and El Bretón, is **Cabo Francés Viejo** (Mon–Fri 10am–4pm; RD$50), a small national park centred on a majestic cape, holding a lighthouse at its far end, which makes a great place to take a short stroll and look out over the ocean. East of here there's little of interest besides some ruggedly beautiful beaches set beneath high cliffs – chief among them **Playa El Bretón** – until you reach Cabrera. See Chapter 3 for more on Cabrera itself.

West of Puerto Plata

The contrast east and west of Puerto Plata couldn't be more striking. In place of the paved highways, resort complexes and golf courses that prevail in much of the east, the west contains vast stretches of small family farms and untrammelled wilderness along rough dirt tracks, though some are slowly being converted into proper roads, as developments creep further along the coast. The view towards foreign visitors is different in the west, too; an old code of warm, formal manners prevails, and strangers will often go to great lengths to assist you out of sheer good nature. One thing that doesn't change, though, is the proliferation of lovely beaches – though these get far more use by locals than tourists. Most **coral reefs** here are still intact, and the island's finest are located between Punta Rucia and Monte Cristi. Fine coastal detours from the Carretera Luperón that heads west from just outside Puerto Plata include **Luperón** itself, a remote seaside village that has a couple of comfortable resorts nearby; **El Castillo**, a scenic fishing village that holds the remains of Columbus's first settlement, La Isabela; and the twin beaches **Playa Ensenada** and **Punta Rucia**. Inland a long, fertile strip of verdant rice paddies is set between imposing mountain ranges. At its most western part, towards frontier town **Monte Cristi**, the terrain becomes a more cactus-dominated desert landscape. If you're heading out this way from Puerto Plata, make sure you keep a close eye on your fuel; **petrol stations** are few and far between. If you do get low, look out for the occasional roadside house with litre jugs propped on a table along the road.

Puerto Plata to Luperón

Two routes lead from Puerto Plata to Luperón, the first – and quicker – being the Carretera Luperón (C-30), which you can pick up 1km north of **Imbert**, a town marked mainly by its large Texaco station. A word of warning: it's worth keeping an eye out for farm animals wandering along the curvy Carretera Luperón. On public transport, take a Javilla Tours bus (see p.167) to Imbert, where you can catch a guagua to Luperón.

The **second route** from Puerto Plata to Luperón along the coastal road is a much rougher ride than the first, but offers better scenery and an intimate look at the lives of the DR's rural *campesinos* as you drive through a series of seaside *campos* – outposts so small they couldn't even be called pueblos – dotted with thatch huts, small vegetable gardens and freely roaming farm animals. From the Carretera Puerto Plata, take the northwest turnoff marked "Guzmancito", 10km beyond Puerto Plata. Just after turning, you'll hit the small beach of **Playa Maimón**, typically frequented by a few locals. You're better off forging on to **Playa**

Guzmancito, a gorgeous, mostly abandoned beach another 10km down the road near the tiny fishing *campo* of Cruce de Guzmán, where you can **camp** if you ask permission from the townsfolk first. From here the road passes through the foothills of the Cordillera Septentrional for 15km, affording occasional spectacular ocean views before ending at the Carretera Luperón, from where you can carry on to Luperón and El Castillo.

Luperón

Despite being the most developed of the western beach towns, **LUPERÓN** maintains the dusty, low-key feel still typical of this stretch of coast. The action, as usual, is along the beach, 1km of pearly sand lined with sea grapes and palms known as **Playa Grande**. Though a lovely setting, you need to watch out for sea urchins in the water.

Five hundred metres further down the Carretera de las Américas is the **Puerto Blanca Marina** (ⓣ571-8644), a lively mooring spot that acts as a great social centre for expats in the area, including famous sailor and author Bruce Van Sant, whose *Gentleman's Guide to Passages South* is a bible for those doing the tricky "thorny path" between Florida and Anguilla. The bay here is the best place to rest from the trade winds, offering ample protection from hurricanes and tropical storms and is thus usually bustling with numerous world-travelling vagabonds; as a result, it's normally easy to find someone willing to take you on a sailing day-trip to the hard-to-reach **reefs** around La Isabela and Punta Rucia. A trip should cost you around US$120. Ask around for recommendations and make sure that your prospective captain has radar, radio, life jackets and an emergency life raft. A second smaller and newer marina, the **Luperón Marina Yacht Club** (ⓣ571-8606) lies east of the original, and a third has been under construction for some time.

Practicalities

Luperón is not a bad place to base yourself in the area, though it is quite isolated. Clustered around the park are convenient places to fill most of your other needs, like Tricom, a **pharmacy**, and an **internet** café. If you don't have your own transport and need to get to El Castillo or Punta Rucia from here, Taxi Luperón (ⓣ280-3164) is a reputable operator.

For the best in **accommodation**, travel 2km west of town to Playa Grande and the *Hotasa Luperón Beach Resort* (ⓣ571-8180, ⓦwww.hotasa.es.com; ⑦), actually consisting of two adjacent all-inclusive hotels – *Luperón Beach* and *Tropical Beach* – which possess gorgeous settings with beautiful grounds, large rooms and typical all-inclusive amenities. Though on a lovely beach, ubiquitous local vendors and sea urchins prove a menace to land and sea respectively. Best of the budget options is the German-owned *Casa del Sol*, between the town and marina on Carretera La Isabela (ⓣ712-4293, ⓦwww.casadelsol.com; ②), which has five decent rooms above a restaurant.

Captain Steve's Place is the centre of expat **dining** serving American comfort food. Other eating options include the yacht club's international restaurant, which has a terrace with great views out over the water, and the marina's restaurant, a fairly casual affair that does some excellent and cheap daily specials – try the dorado and octopus salad. The restaurant in the *Casa del Sol*, which is a smart though informal dining room, serves an excellent pepper-steak as well as their house speciality, banana flambé.

Luperón isn't very exciting **by night**, though residents do gather along Calle Duarte and at the park to listen to music streaming from a dozen different car radios. It's at its most festive during power outages – which are infuriatingly frequent in the rural DR – when virtually the whole town heads to the main strip. The marina's **bar** is the centre of various sailing-community activities – including karaoke, film screenings, dance lessons and live music.

El Castillo and around

The Carretera de las Américas heads 13km west from Luperón to sleepy **EL CASTILLO**, a seaside village located on the site of Columbus's first permanent settlement, the remains of which are now nestled inside the small **Parque Nacional La Isabela**, just east of the village. The scenery itself makes the trip worthwhile, passing prosperous plantations along rolling hills and breathtaking shots of the sea. Still, the best ocean views are reserved for the village, which is set on a splendid bay of tranquil blue water and a solid wall of imposing, Olympian peaks stretching in both directions.

El Castillo

The village itself is just a few houses scattered around a grid of tiny dirt roads on a steep hill. The village beach, **Playa Isabela**, attracts few visitors and is marked mainly by the small wooden boats moored just offshore and children fishing at the water's edge. A kilometre out to sea from El Castillo is an intact, living **coral reef** – rare on this island – where you'll see a healthy, multi coloured home to thousands of tropical fish and sea creatures. *Rancho del Sol* (see below) can arrange regular scuba and snorkelling trips, and can also take you to other remote reefs west of Punta Rucia (see p.201).

Practicalities

There is some good-value **accommodation** in El Castillo. *Rancho del Sol*, Carretera de las Américas at the town entrance (☎696-0325; ④), has simple but well-maintained duplexes with kitchen and bath; two have a/c, and you can pay extra for breakfast. On the hill above, with stunning views over the bay, is the Belgian-owned *Miamar*, Calle Vista Mar (☎471-9157; ③), a hotel with cold water, swimming pool, restaurant and ten enormous rooms with king-size beds, kitchenettes and private balconies, and breakfast included in the price.

Miamar is the best for **food** in El Castillo but if you fancy a little *comida criolla*, try *Milagro*, near the entrance to *Rancho del Sol*, a small and friendly *comedor* with a good selection of local dishes including some great spiced goat. The boat-shaped restaurant, *El Castillo del Pirata*, serves decent French fare.

Parque Nacional La Isabela

Just off the main highway, before you reach El Castillo, is the entrance to **Parque Nacional La Isabela** (Mon–Sat 9am–5.30pm, closed Sun; RD$150), which takes up much of the village's shoreline and preserves the ruins of La Isabela, the second oldest European town in the New World. Centred on the private home of Columbus himself, which is perched atop a prominent ocean bluff, the park also encompasses the excavated stone foundations of the town and a small museum, though to see either you'll need to hire a local guide from the main park office (RD$150 tip). Presumably there were far more extensive ruins up until 1960, when Trujillo bulldozed the site in order to turn it into a military fort to defend against sea invasion by insurgents linked to Cuba's Fidel Castro. You'll still see the remnants of two large warehouses, a sentry tower, a chapel, what some assert was a clinic and Columbus's house, which retains a good portion of its walls intact. A number of skeletons have been unearthed from the chapel's cemetery; one – a Spaniard who died of malaria – is rather unceremoniously on display in a box near the museum. The museum itself offers an account (in Spanish) of the cultures of both Spaniards and Tainos at the time of their first encounter. Better than the solemn recitations by the guide are the hundreds of excavated artefacts, including a pottery oven, a kiln and several containers that still held mercury (used to purify gold) when they were unearthed, along with smaller items such as a tiny sixteenth-century crucifix, unglazed Moorish-style pottery shards and several Taino religious icons. Just outside the building are small plots where local anthropologists use traditional agricultural methods practised by the Taino and the colonists.

Two ancillary sites have been uncovered outside the park, both rather uninspiring and not really worth the time.

Across the Carretera from the park, **Templo de las Américas** (daily 8.30am–5pm), a spotless neo-colonial church topped by a high central dome, merits a quick look round. It was constructed for Pope John Paul II's visit to La Isabela in 1992 for the Columbus Centenary, and the Pope gave Mass there on the anniversary of the admiral's landing; a plaque on the outside commemorates the visit. The

The beginning and end of La Isabela

Founded in 1493 by Christopher Columbus and some 1500 Spanish settlers under his command, **La Isabela** was strategically located on a defensible ocean bluff but far from fresh water and fertile soil, oversights that led to its abandonment in favour of Santo Domingo after only four years. Columbus intended that it would become the gold-bearing capital of Spain's empire, organizing it according to the *factoria* system of Portugal's colonies along the northwest coast of Africa; in these, a small group of entrepreneurial partners forced natives to hand over a valuable local commodity (in this case, gold), either as tribute or in exchange for European goods at a ridiculously low rate.

However, it soon became evident that there was not much gold to be had, and after **yellow fever** and **malaria** killed half of the original settlers, the rest became increasingly disgusted. Another sticking point was the tradition of Christian conquest in Spain, which allowed soldiers to enslave Moors on conquered lands. At first Columbus opposed transplanting slavery here, and as hardships mounted he demanded that colonists perform manual labour regardless of rank, alienating the petty nobility. After a failed coup attempt, several nobles stole one of his boats and set off for Spain to complain of the goings-on. In mid-1494, Columbus, perhaps realizing that he was in danger of losing the faith of his men, waged two military campaigns to capture Tainos, allotting slaves to his men in lieu of monthly wages. The Indians were to work the surrounding fields, though many were able to escape.

Two years later Columbus sailed to Spain to request more settlers, leaving his brother **Bartolomé** in charge of La Isabela. On his departure, a group of colonists led by Columbus's personal servant Francisco Roldán revolted and went to settle in the outlying countryside. Bartolomé abandoned La Isabela in 1497 with his few remaining men for the site of Santo Domingo, where one Spaniard had found a large gold nugget. On Columbus's return in 1498, his town lay abandoned; two years later, he was removed from command in Santo Domingo and sent back to Spain in disgrace.

interior is simple but striking, with marble floors and red-brick walls; even better is the elevated vista of Bahía de Isabela from the top of the steps.

Laguna Estero Hondo

Just west of El Castillo is **Laguna Estero Hondo**, one of the last remaining Dominican homes of the **manatee**, which has been killed off in droves in recent decades, largely in speedboat accidents. The hotels in town, and also El Paraíso Tours (Ⓣ612-8499) in Punta Rucia, can organize boat excursions into the lagoon, though it may be best to give them a few days' notice; a trip to the lagoon is included in El Paraíso Tours' boat trip to Cayo Paraíso (see p.201). Even then, sightings are not guaranteed – it is estimated that there are only a couple of dozen individuals left at most – but you will see a gorgeous mangrove reserve that serves as a haven for tropical birds, such as egret, wood stork and roseate spoonbill.

West to Punta Rucia

From El Castillo the road to Punta Rucia extends west around the lagoon and heads through increasingly arid scrubland to a series of beaches that relatively few foreign visitors make it to. The road is mainly dirt and there are two shallow rivers for which bridges have yet to be built. It's usually possible to drive through these and there's never a shortage of locals loitering nearby to assist if you're not confident. Be aware, though, they'll want a good tip. After around 10km, a turnoff heads north to pueblo **Estero Hondo**, a village with no tourist facilities but set in a river delta replete with birdlife and mosquitoes.

Four kilometres further west, **Playa El Pato**, a small cove protected by a giant reef that turns it into a large natural swimming pool, is rather sparsely populated, at least much more so than **Playa Ensenada**, 1km further west, where Dominican families come to take advantage of the shallow waters. The western end of the 1km-long Playa Ensenada, where it meets the road, is quieter, with stunning white sand, gently lapping turquoise water and a few small boats bobbing just offshore with the mountains as a background. Turn right to the eastern end of the beach for a totally different cultural experience with radios blasting the sounds of bachata and a few shacks selling food and rum. The food's usually excellent and the rum's always cheap.

Punta Rucia

Just around the point from Playa Ensenada, **Punta Rucia** is arguably the most beautiful beach on the north coast, with more ivory sand and great mountain views. It attracts fewer people than Ensenada but has several informal local places to stop for lunch or a beer, some with live music. The small point that separates the two beaches is bordered by a thriving **coral reef**, which provides good snorkelling.

From Punta Rucia (and from some Puerto Plata-based all-inclusives) you can pick up a fairly expensive **boat tour** that takes tourists twice daily to **Cayo Paraíso**, also known as Cayo Arena, a small, perfectly circular desert island about 7km west of Punta Rucia surrounded by thriving coral and sea life, and with a handful of palm-thatched tourist amenities in the centre. However, when tour groups from Playa Dorada pour in during peak season, the tiny sandbar can be rather crowded and you should also note that the only toilet facilities are on the mainland. Punta Rucia-based El Paraíso Tours (Ⓣ320-7606, Ⓦwww.cayoparaiso.com; US$50) operates the tours, which includes transport in a speedboat to the island for snorkelling and a large lunch, returning via dense snarls of mangroves in Monte Cristi national park.

Practicalities

In addition to the easier El Castillo road, you can reach Punta Rucia from a road that leads north from the Santiago–Monte Cristi Carretera; the turnoff is at **Villa Elisa**, from where **guaguas** also run on weekends up to Punta Rucia. Unfortunately, this road is only well paved for the first 14km out of Villa Elisa; after that it's a pretty rough ride.

Punta Rucia is the only one of the three beaches that has any form of **accommodation**. *Punta Rucia Sol* (Ⓣ471-0173; ②) is pretty basic, with plainly furnished bedrooms and cold water, but still something of a hidden gem, oozing a timeless, unhurried tranquillity that's really quite addictive. At the other end of the scale, *Villa Playa* (Ⓦwww.villaplaya.com; ⑧) is a luxury two-storey beach house right on the front with large rooms, sea-facing balconies, fully-equipped kitchen, maid/cooking service, kayaks and even a fishing boat for the guests' use. **Camping** is your only option at the other two beaches, though keep in mind that they're notorious for their nocturnal sand fleas. There are a few Dominican seafood **restaurants** along the beach while all along both Punta Rucia and Playa Ensenada, vendors sell **fresh oysters** culled the same day from the nearby river's mouth.

West to Monte Cristi

All paved roads come to an end in El Castillo, and the condition of the dirt tracks west deteriorates even further beyond Punta Rucia, so if you want to head **west to Monte Cristi**, you'll have a tough, though likely rewarding, time of it. It's not too bad to pueblo **El Cupey**, where the main road continues south to meet up with the Carretera Duarte (see below); but west of this is the arid **La Costa de Buen Hombre**, a long stretch of desert terrain dominated by scrub brush, which you'll need a **motorcycle** to traverse. The main track soon dissolves into a narrow mule track, intersected at random by others that are equally narrow and badly surfaced. Maps of the area don't do it justice – so be prepared to ask directions from the mule teams you'll encounter along the way. Stick to the coast and you'll find a modest sign marking the turnoff to **Gran Mangle** – one of the most isolated fishing villages in the country. Set on a small, dramatic point, Gran Mangle is mostly rocky coast, but there are a few patches of beach here and there along with an intact coral **reef**. The mule trails continue in a similar vein for around 20km, leading to the pueblo **El Jabo**, near the base of the towering El Morro mesa. From here you'll navigate around El Morro through the weeds, avoiding the mesa's soggy moat, to get to Playa Juan de Bolaños and Monte Cristi, at the DR's northwestern tip.

The Carretera Duarte

Bordering the Cordillera Septentrional to the south is the **Carretera Duarte** – an extension of the Autopista Duarte, which stretches between Santiago and Santo Domingo – a road that provides a far easier way to get to Monte Cristi than the coastal mule tracks. The well-paved freeway stretches from Santiago to Monte

Cristi, intersecting the Carretera Puerto Plata at **Navarrete**, a major tobacco centre. As you move west, tobacco fields quickly give way to banana trees and rice paddies; at Villa Elisa, the land suddenly becomes arid, transforming into a cactus-dominated desert teeming with goats. The towns that line it are all fairly basic, with at most a couple of *colmados* and the occasional cockfighting arena. As far as basic necessities along the way go, petrol stations are mercifully posted every 20km or so, and the best place to eat along the way is *La Sandán*, a restaurant in pueblo Jaibón (just past Laguna Saluda), famous nationwide for its goat dishes. *Mi Casa*, at the Punta Rucia turnoff in Villa Elisa, is another good option.

Monte Cristi

MONTE CRISTI has the feel of the mythic Wild West, a dusty frontier town bearing the occasional tarnished remnant of its opulent past along wide, American-style boulevards that the sand incessantly tries to reclaim. Among the very oldest European cities in the New World, it was founded in 1501 and became one of the country's most important ports in the eighteenth century, when it shipped out vast quantities of mahogany. The next century saw the port, like Puerto Plata to the east, benefit greatly from the tobacco boom, but its prosperity came to an abrupt end during the era of Trujillo, who shut down its shipping in retribution for local resistance to his rule. The town has never fully recovered, and the only industry of note comes from the large Morton **saltpans** – rectangular pools of the salty local water that are filled from a canal and then harvested by allowing the water to evaporate – just north and south of the city, which supply much of North America's table salt.

Most people use Monte Cristi as a base from which to explore the local **beaches** and the **Parque Nacional Monte Cristi**. The latter protects a towering mesa named El Morro, an enormous river delta region with a wildlife-filled mangrove coast and a series of seven tiny sandy islets, encircled by coral, where sea turtles and migratory seabirds lay their eggs.

Arrival and information

Monte Cristi is fairly well served by public transport. Frequent **guaguas** run between Santiago and Dajabón, stopping at the guagua station at the top end of Calle Duarte, near the Shell petrol station. From here it's a 5min walk to the centre of town or a RD$50 *motoconcho* ride down to the accommodation at the beach. Offering a greater degree of comfort for a few pesos more, Caribe Tours runs a **bus** service (☎579-2129) to and from Santo Domingo six times a day (4hr 30min; RD$350) via Santiago (2hr; RD$180). Their office is a couple of blocks further into town just off the main intersection between Duarte and Avenida Mella.

Most services are on and around Duarte and Mella, including the **petrol stations** and main **pharmacy**. Codetel, offering **internet** and telephone services, is adjacent to the *Chic Hotel*, on Monción and Duarte. The two main **supermarkets**, on Duarte and Alvarez, and Alvarez and Pte Vasquez, have **ATMs**, as does the town's sole **bank** in Duarte, just up from the park.

Accommodation

Cayo Arena Playa Juan de Bolaños, 250m west of the beach entrance ☎579-3145, Ⓦwww.cayoarena.com. Decent-sized two-bedroom apartments on the beach, with ocean-view balconies (some better than others), a/c and kitchenettes. They sleep six and so are ideal for families. There is a bar on site and they also run tours (see p.205). ⑥

Chic Hotel corner of Monción and Duarte ☎579-2316, ⓦwww.chichotel.net. This budget option in the town centre offers good value, though rooms and bathrooms are small and upstairs ceilings are low. The basic rooms have fans (an extra RD$400 for a/c) and some have hot water. Wi-fi throughout. ②

Hostal San Fernando Carretera del Morro ☎626-0100. Located just off the water at the base of El Morro in pleasant surroundings. Under new ownership the place is being totally renovated at the time of writing, due to reopen mid-2011. Given the substantial investment in upgrading the facilities, the place is likely to go up a price bracket or two. ③

Hotel Montechico Bolaños, by the sea ☎579-315. The fabulous location over the water – you can hear the waves lapping – and smartly painted exterior promise much but the interior is in need of attention and the service is desultory. Still, the rooms themselves are adequate, clean with decent beds, a fan (a/c is extra) and a fridge; some have more furniture than similarly priced hotels provide. ③

Los Jardines Playa Juan de Bolaños, 300m west of the beach entrance ☎579-2091, ⓦwww.elbistrot.com. Four simple cabin-rooms with cold-water showers and fans are set in a small manicured garden. A nice spot but a trifle overpriced. The place also rents out bicycles, rowing boats and jeeps. ⑤

The Town

The town focus is the charming **Parque Central** with its singular Eiffel-style clock tower, imported from France at the beginning of the twentieth century, in its centre and a pleasant faux-colonial church across the street. Also at the park on Duarte is the Victorian Villa Doña Emilia Jiménez; a palatial old wooden building that was the residence of an early Dominican president, it is sadly being allowed to decay despite a fairly recent restoration. In striking contrast, a few doors along, the new coral stone Museo de Monte Cristi is set to open in 2011. In the barrio just south of the park are several c.1900 **gingerbread mansions** worth a look, including one two blocks south on Calle Mella that was owned by Cuban liberator Máximo Gómez. It's now a fairly dreary museum that's rarely open (theoretically Mon–Fri 9am–noon & 2.30–5.30pm; free), set in a nice garden, with period furnishings, personal mementoes and an account of his fight for the liberation of both Cuba and the Dominican Republic from Spain.

Monte Cristi's beaches

Just north of the city, 2km up Calle Bolaños past the saltpans, is **Playa Juan de Bolaños**, the area's most popular though unremarkable beach. At its entrance you'll find a cluster of hotels and a restaurant; elsewhere it's less populated. If you

Carnival in Monte Cristi

Monte Cristi is somewhat infamous for its peculiarly violent **Carnival celebrations**. Each Sunday in February, the locals split into two groups: the Toros, who dress in stylized Carnival bull masks and bright cloth outfits decorated with mirrors, whistles and other miscellaneous bangles, and the unadorned Civilis. Both parties protect themselves by putting on four or five layers of clothing, including winter coats, then proceed to attack each other in the streets with **bullwhips**. Police measure the whips beforehand to ensure that they do not exceed a certain length, and combatants are not supposed to hit anyone in the face, though these safety measures don't eliminate the danger. Onlookers are supposed to be safe from the proceedings, but with hundreds of people whizzing deadly weapons through the air, you're better off watching the "festivities" from the first-floor balcony of the *Hotel Chic* restaurant, conveniently located at the centre of the action.

turn east, the beach road passes numerous small fishing boats and the large Club Nautico Marina before arriving at the entrance to the eastern half of Parque Nacional Monte Cristi. Five hundred metres to the west is a river you'll have to ford by foot to reach the beach known locally as **Playa de los Muertos** (Beach of the Dead) for the dead that washed up here from hurricane-sunk Spanish galleons in the early sixteenth century; its most notable feature today is the palm trees that have been uprooted and deposited here by tide and tropical storms. To get to Playa de los Muertos by car, drive south of town on Carretera 45 until you arrive at the first bridge. From there take a right, and the dirt road will lead you straight to the beach.

Parque Nacional Monte Cristi

Parque Nacional Monte Cristi (free) is essentially divided into two parts by Monte Cristi's beaches. Its eastern section is often referred to as Parque El Morro, after the flat-topped mesa **El Morro** that takes up a good chunk of it. Climbing the mesa is reasonably straightforward: a set of steps leads up from the road's highest point, near the park office at the far eastern end of Playa Bolaños. At the foot of El Morro's eastern slope is a lovely and unpopulated **beach**, though it only exists from around February to August. To gain access, park at the end of the same road and continue down on foot. From there you can swim out to **Isla Cabrita**, a large island punctuated by a lighthouse, some 300m offshore. The waters surrounding the park contain several **shipwrecks**, two of them colonial-era galleons – long plundered – that sought safe harbour from storm in the Bahía Manzanillo just west of here and didn't make it.

The western half of the national park encompasses an inland swath of arid desert environment and a dense coastal mangrove swamp dotted with small lagoons, which is home to innumerable orchids, ibises, egrets, pelicans and a host of other birds. The protected area also stretches out to sea, taking in **Los Siete Hermanos**, seven tiny islands 1km offshore, with arid vegetation and desolate beaches, which host thousands of nesting terns, noddys and sea turtles. By far the most beautiful is known as "Tuna", in honour of the gorgeous, white-flowering tuna cacti that grow here.

The alluring mangrove coast is accessible only **by boat**. Tours can be booked through the *Los Jardines* hotel (see opposite), on which you'll see several river deltas thick with mangroves and perhaps a couple of crocodiles, as well as El Paraíso Tours in Punta Rucia, who visit the mangroves as part of a trip out to Cayo Paraíso (see p.201). You can also **hire** a fishing boat at Playa Bolaños; check at the kiosk opposite the Politur office, a few hundred metres along from *Hotel Montechico*. Prices are generally per boatload and are around RD$1200 for transport to and from Isla Cabrita, RD$2000 for a couple of hours gliding round the mangroves, and RD$4000–5000 for a trip to Los Siete Hermanos. As with all negotiations, make sure both parties are agreed on the price, timings, and what is included before setting off and pay no more than half upfront, if requested.

Monte Cristi is an especially great place for fishing; trips operated by the apart-hotel *Cayo Arena* go out to an area called the Cordillera, possibly the best fishing ground on the Dominican coast.

Eating and drinking

Monte Cristi is not a great place for **nightlife**, but there are a couple of discos in town, including one attached to the *Don Gaspar* and another to the noisy *Hotel Chic* by the Parque Central, and live acts sometimes perform at the *Hotel Montechico* during holiday periods.

Bar-restaurant Doña Ana Altagracia 75, near the police station. The place to go for the town's best Dominican cuisine at modest prices: chicken, fish, beans and goat, washed down with ice-cold beer.

El Bistrot Bolaños ☎579-2091. An unlikely find for Monte Cristi: a sophisticated, French restaurant serving succulent seafood dishes – particularly the lobster and skillets of shrimp – in an atmospheric courtyard.

Cocomar Bolaños, on the beach. This beachside restaurant is quite gloomy at night and the seating is uncomfortable. This is offset by friendly staff, however, and a menu offering decent seafood – and mounds of it – at tourist prices. Try the crab (RD$455) or sea bass fillet (RD$350).

Pizzeria Paolo Bolaños. Thick-based pizzas made by the Italian owner-chef, ranging from simple cheese (RD$220) to *super-hongos* (albeit with tinned mushrooms; RD$550). Half-pizzas also sold. Open evenings; closed Tues.

The northern Haitian border

From Monte Cristi a partially tarred road heads almost due south, skirting the protected mangrove forest lining the **Bahía de Manzanillo**, before hitting the Haitian border 34km later at the edgy frontier town of **Dajabón**. Few travellers venture further, but those who do are rewarded with splendid mountain scenery and **spectacular views** as the road spirals up into the Cordillera Central, hugging the border, as far as the remote hillside town of Restauración. From here, you can gain access to a little-visited national park, the **Parque Nacional Nalga de Maco**.

Dajabón

DAJABÓN, 34km due south of Monte Cristi, is the biggest of the border towns, and unsurprisingly holds the largest formal crossing and best regional market. The Spanish had a fort here from the mid-sixteenth century, but it was little more than a collection of small farms until 1794, when Touissant L'Ouverture slaughtered most of the locals and resettled the spot with Haitians (the river that flows along the border here has been called the Massacre ever since).

Dajabón is now firmly Dominican, but hundreds of Haitians pour into town on **market days**, typically held within the eight square blocks bordering the bridge (Mon–Fri 9am–4pm). Freelance Dominican entrepreneurs come from as far as Santo Domingo – buying bulk quantities of grain and produce from Dominican farmers, swapping them to the Haitians for clothing and household goods and then selling the Haitian wares to individual clothing and department stores in the major cities; many of the "designer" labels that you'll find on the streets of Santo Domingo are actually Haitian counterfeits. The Haitians come across the "**Friendship Bridge**" at the western end of town – the women balancing huge bushels crammed with gym shoes on their heads while the men lift impossibly loaded wheelbarrows – and claim small patches of pavement for their impromptu shops.

Into Haiti

Dajabón is usually the most trafficked overland entry, partially because it's within striking distance of **Fort Liberté** – the most interesting Haitian site along the

The Haiti earthquake

In January 2010, measuring 7.0 on the Richter Scale, the most powerful **earthquake** to hit Haiti in 200 years caused unprecedented devastation on the western side of Hispaniola, killing almost 300,000 people, injuring as many, and leaving an estimated 1.5 million homeless. The epicentre was located close to the capital, **Port-au Prince**, reducing entire urban areas to rubble. The fact that 25 percent of Haiti's civil service was wiped out in the disaster, combined with the country's already fragile physical and social infrastructure, added to the usual panoply of problems that beleaguer large-scale relief efforts. Despite the Dominican Republic's perennial acrimonious relations with its poorer neighbour, **President Fernández** garnered international plaudits for his immediate response to the earthquake, supplying medical services, volunteers and pledging vast sums of aid, including $40 million for a new university. He also championed the right of the Haitian government to maintain control of the aid efforts, while facilitating the arrival of supplies and relief personnel through the DR. Another positive outcome was that the disaster jolted the Dominican–Haitian Mixed Bilateral Commission out of its torpor as it met for the first time since 2000 to address issues of mutual concern. Though the anticipated mass influx of **refugees** across the border into the DR did not occur in the initial aftermath of the quake, over the last twelve months, around a million people are thought to have entered the country since a year on, despite sustained relief efforts, Haiti's homeless remain in tented camps, with little prospect of improved living conditions, and, at the time of writing, escalating outbreaks of **cholera** adding to the misery. This increase in migration has already put a strain on the countries' precarious new relationship as thousands of Haitians deemed to be in the DR illegally are being deported back over the border, on a scale unprecedented in recent years.

border. One of the oldest and best preserved French forts in the New World, it lies in ruins along the **Bay of Dauphin**, a perfectly round body of deep-blue water 100m west of the town of Fort Liberté, with a bottleneck opening to the Atlantic visible in the distance. Called Fort Dauphin during French rule, it was constructed to defend the strategic bay and large French fleet that the waters harboured. The eastern wall is in rubble at several points, but the bulk of the fortress is intact, its armoury now inhabited by stray goats, and with several passageways leading through the chambers of the large, central building. You can still see the plaza's irrigation system that fed fresh water into a central fountain; the two large holes in the ground nearby led to the prison. The western wall is intact as well, with a narrow, coral walkway from which to peer at the spectacular bay views; on the water you'll see wooden fishing boats with home-made sails. The village of Fort Liberté merits only a quick look; check out the town market, with stalls hawking produce, live chickens, fried johnnycakes and various household wares.

In order to get there, you'll have to pass through the Haitian town of **Ouanaminthe**, just across the border, and referred to by Dominicans as Juana Méndez.

Practicalities

The last **guagua** back to Monte Cristi or Santiago leaves from Dajabón at 6pm. Caribe Tours is nearby at Beller 30 with six **buses** running to and from the capital. Battered minivans head south to Loma de Cabrera at regular intervals from a block south of the park. If you're heading south **by car**, you'll need to take a left at the town's second military installation. You're not allowed to drive a rental car into Haiti, and the bridge in Dajabón isn't wide enough for vehicular traffic in any event. Normally the **border** is open daily 9am to 5pm (8am–4pm in Haiti as they are one hour behind).

Crossing into Haiti at Dajabón for a day-trip isn't cheap; you'll pay a US$25 **departure tax** to the Dominicans, then stop off at the Haitian outpost on the other side and pay US$11 in Haitian *gourdes* – available at lousy rates from the **money changers** on the bridge – and perhaps another "informal" payment to the man who processes your visa. Upon your return, you'll have to pay US$10, and the *buscando* who helps speed up the immigration process will want around RD$200 as well. Throw in RD$400 for a motorcycle driver and your total comes to over US$60.

Back on the Dominican side, *Juan Calvo* (☎579-8285; ②), on the main park at Henriquez 46, is Dajabón's best **hotel** by far, with clean basic rooms, with private bath (some with hot water), cable TV and fan or a/c. The hotel also has a **restaurant** that's your best dining option, and it's only a block from the town gate, where you'll find a phone centre, Western Union and the informal guagua station.

Santiago de la Cruz

Santiago de la Cruz, 10km south of Dajabón, stands at one of the border's main crossroads, but the only thing in town worth noting is its **petrol station**, La Gasolina, which is also a pick-up point for Caribe Tours. When one of the frequent fuel shortages hits Port-au-Prince, a hundred or more Haitians queue up with several containers to drag back across the border and sell.

Five kilometres east of Santiago de la Cruz along Highway 18, **LOS INDIOS DE CHACUEY** offers a worthwhile detour – though it's more a scattering of small farms than a town – thanks to its Taino archeological site. The **Plaza Indigena de Chacuey** is a large circle that was once lined with boulders that can still be made out as a depression in the ground. This site was one of the largest indigenous settlements before Columbus. Today local kids have made a baseball field out of it, and it was long scoured by freelance treasure-seekers who sold hundreds of its artefacts to private collectors around the world. Happily, the government has now protected the place, and it's illegal to pick up even a pebble. From the circle's northwestern edge, a small dirt path leads to the highway and the Río Chacuey; follow the river south for a hundred metres and you'll find that many of the river boulders have **Taino petroglyphs** hammered into them, pointillist style. You'll see not only the trademark Taino faces, but a couple of full human figures, snakes, one lizard and some more basic, abstract symbols. Head north along the river past the main road about 100m to find a clear, deep watering hole – great for a midday swim amid placid natural surroundings.

Loma de Cabrera

The beautiful, pine-dominated Cordillera Central begins as you approach **LOMA DE CABRERA**, 20km south of Dajabón and a mellow frontier town named after Restoration General José Cabrera. What there is of a town, more a ribbon of dusty shacks, lines the main road from the north for approximately 1km and then splits at a congested junction, where the road south to Restauración bears right. The only feature of interest to tourists within the town itself is the **Haitian market** held on Tuesday mornings. Just east of town, though, you'll find a popular **balneario** on Calle María Trinidad Sánchez, a pleasant enough place to visit, though it's crowded on weekends and noisy thanks to a relatively new disco. The grounds surrounding it are rubbish-strewn, but the *balneario* itself has clean mountain water and is set beneath a picturesque cascade.

A few kilometres west of Loma de Cabrera is the **Monument to the Heroes of the Restoration of the Republic** (daily 9am–6pm; free), referred to more commonly as the "Monumento de Capotillo", a stylish twentieth-century tribute to the renewal of Dominican independence, set on the spot where General Cabrera crossed over the border with his rebel troops and began the war against the occupying Spaniards. Designed by Dominican architect Rafael Calventi and completed in 1983, the complex – a series of broad steps rising up to a large building that holds several sculptures, all of it fashioned from Italian marble – has the feel more of abandoned ruins than contemporary civic monument, acknowledged and accented by Calventi through the use of a field of mock pillars scattered along the expansive marble steps, cleanly sliced off at various points to suggest an ancient city gone to rubble. On the elevated central plaza are two structures shaped in the form of stylized axe-heads, the larger of which holds six social-realist murals depicting the conflict. Rising up from a hole in the building's floor is Ranico Matos' *The Flame of Liberty*, a brilliantly contrived sculpture that imparts the hypnotic motion of flame through spiralled steel. Behind the monument a small path leads to a hill marked with a Dominican flag; walk up for terrific views of the Haitian countryside.

Practicalities

Caribe Tours has an office on the left as you enter the town from Dajabón. **Buses** for Santo Domingo leave three times a day. Frequent **guaguas** from Dajabón (40min) deposit passengers at the main crossroads; those wanting to travel on to Restauración, should walk round the corner and wait for a less frequent *público* – usually a pick-up truck – to fill.

Accommodation is basic in Loma de Cabrera, the best option being the *Santa Clara* on Duarte 89 (☎579-4281; ①), with clean rooms and private cold-water baths. Really, though, if you have transport you're better off staying at the cabañas at edenic Río Limpio (see below). The best **places to eat** are *Comedor Restaurant Franseq*, which occupies a second-floor balcony just north of town on the highway and doles out heaped plates of whatever dish the cook has made that night for around RD$150, or *Rosa D'Típico Chanel* on Calle Diaz, which is also perfectly reliable.

Río Limpio and Parque Nacional Nalga de Maco

Just north of the town of Restauración (itself 10km south of Loma de Cabrera), a rough dirt road leads 12km to the mountain hamlet of **Río Limpio**, easily the most idyllic spot along the entire border. It sits majestically on the banks of **Río Artibonite**, with spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and valley. While the tiny village doesn't hold any major sights, it's a relaxing spot to unwind. You can swim in the local river, go hiking, and if you decide to stay on, spend the night in town at the simple cabañas (no phone; ①) run by the community tourism association that offer Zarathustrian views.

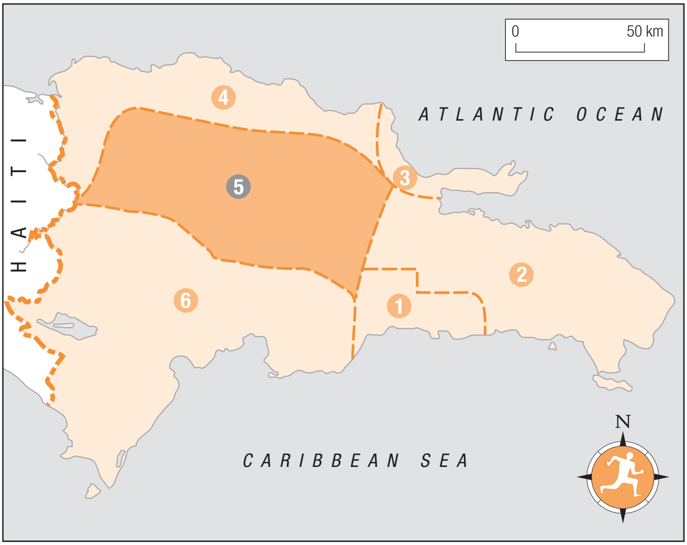
Río Limpio is also the starting point for treks to the caves that lie below the twin peaks of **Nalga de Maco**, which means, literally, "Frog's Butt", because the shape of the mountain peaks resembles a colossal frog that has fallen out of the sky and landed bottom-up. You enter the cave system via a canyon set between the two peaks – if the peaks are the frog's buttocks, you can probably guess what they call the cave entrance.

Only the most seasoned trekkers and backpackers should attempt the difficult trip, which can take several days, and it's not something you can decide to do on the spur of the moment. You're best off getting a permit from the national parks office in Santo Domingo, but there is a forestry supervisor in Río Limpio who is familiar with the caves and can arrange for a good local guide and some mules for a few hundred pesos per person. Pack food, camping equipment, torches or headlamps, insect repellent and lots of water. The trek takes at least twelve hours (many have to camp for the night along the way), so you should set off at the crack of dawn.

There are two separate cave systems: **Cueva San Francisco** is very steep and can really only be explored by professional spelunkers. It boasts an impressive array of unblemished Taino rock art, but they're extremely difficult to get to and draw few visitors; most who make the trip are either speleologists or *Vodú* adherents who come to worship here. **Cueva Nalga de Maco** is more suited to amateur foot traffic, and you can see 250m worth of passages without crawling through guano or going underwater. At the entrance stands a large stalagmite that has been dressed up as a *Vodú* representation of the Virgin of Altagracia, while inside are several Taino pictographs, including a remarkably beautiful hummingbird.

5

The Cibao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CHAPTER 5 Highlights

- **Centro León** Explore the history and culture of the Dominican Republic, from Taino petroglyphs to cigar making and merengue, at Santiago's world-class cultural centre. **See p.220**
- **La Vega Carnival** A massive street party in February with platoons of rowdy participants roaming the streets in wild hand-crafted masks. **See p.229**
- **Salto Jimenoa Uno** The biggest and very best of Jarabacoa's many thundering waterfalls, used as a backdrop for the opening scene of *Jurassic Park*. **See p.232**
- **Whitewater rafting, Jarabacoa** The Río Yaque del Norte plays host to a number of intense whitewater adventures. **See p.232**
- **Pico Duarte** Five strenuous treks lead up to the summit of the Caribbean's tallest peak, a can't-miss adventure for all outdoor enthusiasts. **See p.235**
- **Constanza** Relax in this lush, circular Shangri-la valley in the Cordillera Central. **See p.238**

▲ La Vega Carnival

5

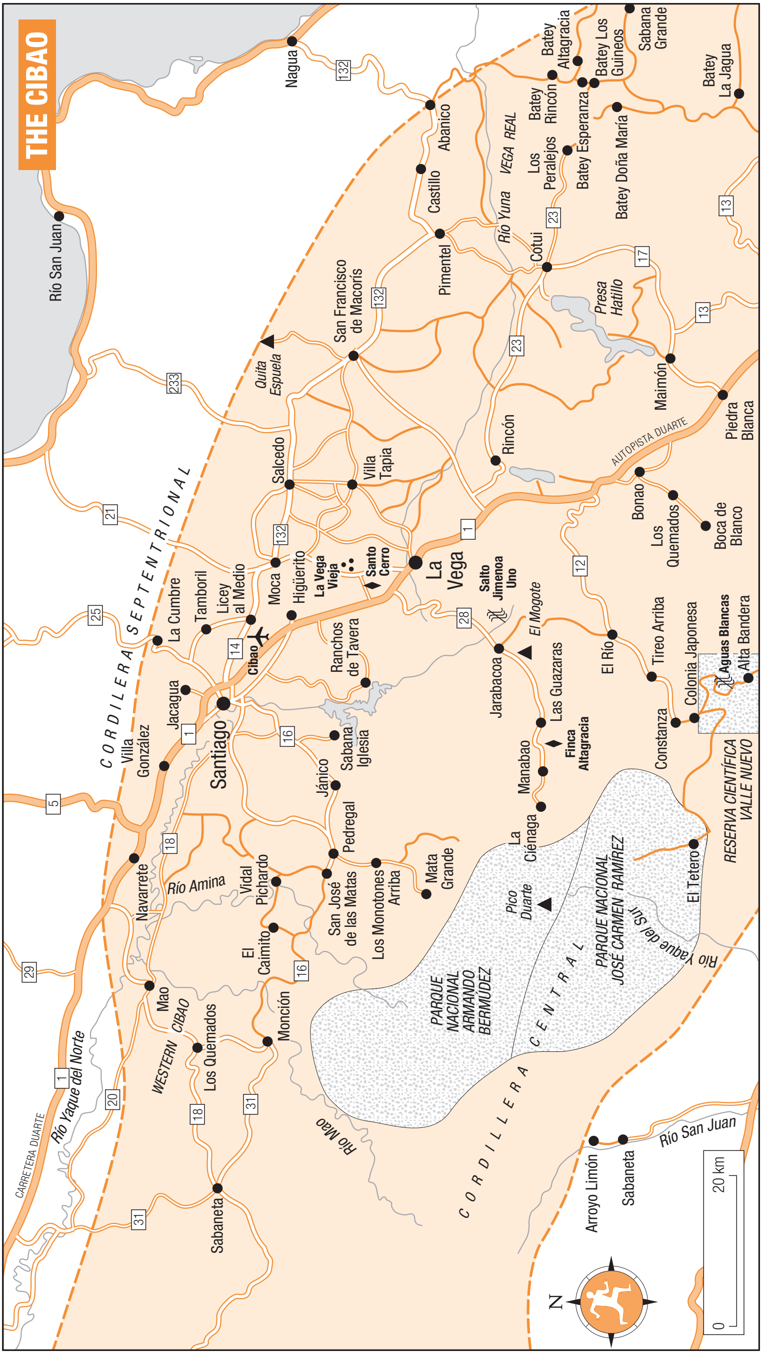
The Cibao

Cibao (rocky land) is the word Tainos used to describe the Cordillera Central mountain range that takes up much of the Dominican Republic's central interior, ploughing its way westward through Haiti (where it's called the Massif du Nord) and then popping up again in Cuba and Central America. The Dominican section of these mountains has by far the **highest peaks** in the Caribbean, higher even than North America's Appalachians, with some mountains over 3000m, including **Pico Duarte**, the Caribbean's loftiest at 3087m. Today the heart of the range is protected as **Parques Nacionales Bermúdez y Ramírez** and **Reserva Científica Valle Nuevo**, three national parks inaugurated between the 1950s and 1970s to preserve the remaining virgin pine- and cloud-forest, as well as the many rivers that begin in these parts. The need to safeguard the region's rivers is in no small part due to the fact that they provide ninety percent of the DR's fresh water and a third of its electricity.

Today, though, Dominicans use the term Cibao more to describe the fertile **Cibao valley** – the island's breadbasket since pre-Columbian times – that lies between the Cordillera Central to the south and west and the Cordillera Septentrional, the mountain range to the north. This valley can be neatly divided into two sections: the **western Cibao**, a ribbon of farmland north of the central mountains, and the prosperous **Vega Real**, a triangle of alluvial plain between **Santiago**, **Cotuí** and **San Francisco de Macorís**, which contains some of the deepest topsoil in the world. During the nineteenth century the Vega Real's agricultural middle classes were the country's primary exponents of democracy and engaged in a century-long struggle for power with the demagogic cattle ranchers of the southeast.

The appeal of the Cibao is not as obvious as that of the coastal resorts, but you'll still find plenty to do, especially in **Santiago**, the country's second largest city after Santo Domingo. Besides its legendary nightlife, Santiago is well positioned for short excursions into the neighbouring farmland, which produces some of the world's best **cigars** – you can easily see the process firsthand. It's likely you'll head south from Santiago on your way to Santo Domingo, past a chain of Cibao towns that Columbus founded as gold-mining outposts. Of these, **La Vega** is the choice stop, holding the DR's largest **Carnival** celebration and the ruins of Columbus's colony La Vega Vieja, east of the present-day city.

For most, however, the first priority is the **mountains**. Surrounded by picturesque scenery, the small but bubbly town of **Jarabacoa** is best set up for tourism, with a tidy array of hotels and restaurants, plus plenty of adventure-tour outfits offering everything from whitewater rafting, kayaking and cascading to three-day treks up bald-headed **Pico Duarte**. Another Pico Duarte trail begins near **San José de las Matas**, a mellow mountain village that makes a pleasant day-trip from


THE CIBAO
Río San Juan
Nagua
132
Abanico
Castillo
Pimentel
Batey Altagracia
Batey Rincón
Batey Los Guineos
Sabana Grande
Batey Esperanza
Los Peralejos
Batey Doña María
Batey La Jagua
VEGA REAL
Río Yuna
Cotuí
23
13
17
Presa Hatillo
Maimón
13
Piedra Blanca
AUTOPISTA DUARTE
Bonao
Los Quemados
Boca de Blanco
Rincón
23
San Francisco de Macorís
132
Quita Espuela
Salcedo
Villa Tapia
233
21
CORDILLERA SEPTENTRIONAL
La Cumbre
Tamboril
Licey al Medio
Moca
132
Higüerito
La Vega Vieja
Santo Cerro
La Vega
1
Salto Jimenoa Uno
El Mogote
28
12
El Río
Tireo Arriba
Colonia Japonesa
Aguas Blancas
Alta Bandera
Constanza
Jarabacoa
Las Guazaras
Finca Altagracia
Manabao
La Ciénaga
Pico Duarte
PARQUE NACIONAL ARMANDO BERMÚDEZ
PARQUE NACIONAL JOSÉ CARMEN RAMÍREZ
Río Yaque del Sur
El Tetero
RESERVA CIENTÍFICA VALLE NUEVO
CORDILLERA CENTRAL
Arroyo Limón
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Cibao
14
Jacagua
Santiago
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Villa González
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16
Sabana Iglesia
Ranchos de Tavera
Jánico
Pedregal
Mata Grande
Los Monotones Arriba
San José de las Matas
Vidal Pichardo
Río Amina
18
Navarrete
El Caimito
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Moncíon
29
Mao
WESTERN CIBAO
Los Quemados
18
31
Sabaneta
31
20
1
Río Yaque del Norte
CARRETERA DUARTE
Río Mao

Santiago, while one of the most difficult trails – a gruelling five-day trek – sets off from **Constanza**, a circular utopian valley in the heart of the highest part of the range. Aside from the isolation and fresh air, Constanza's attractions include several hiking trails, an impressive waterfall and a jagged but scenic road that leads south through the **Reserva Científica Valle Nuevo** to **San José de Ocóa** at the southern end of the range. Wherever you go, remember that these are substantial mountains and should be explored only with hiking boots, warm clothing and decent waterproofs.

If you really want to get away from other tourists, look no further than the farming towns in the Vega Real, like **Moca**, **Cotuí** and **San Francisco de Macorís**.

The western Cibao

The **WESTERN CIBAO** is the less fertile of the valley's two halves, increasingly arid as it approaches the Haitian border. Extending in a narrow ribbon between two mountain ranges, its fields are given over to tobacco near **Santiago**, the heartland city that separates it from the Vega Real; to rice paddies in the quieter districts surrounding **Mao**; and to irrigated banana plantations as it devolves into a desert from **Sabaneta** onward. Outside Santiago, the main interest comes from some beautiful mountain **scenery** and an opportunity to rub shoulders with the locals away from the traditional tourist trail. If you need something to aim for, consider a short jaunt to **San José de las Matas** or **Monción**, villages in the northern foothills of the Cordillera Central, easily accessible from both Santiago and Mao.

Santiago

For five centuries **SANTIAGO** (or Santiago de los Caballeros, to give it its full name) has been the main transport point for Cibao tobacco, bananas, coffee and chocolate; farmers still truck the lion's share of their produce here before it is transported to Puerto Plata and Santo Domingo for export. Set at the intersection of the western Cibao and the Vega Real, and with easy access to the country's two major ports, its prime location has brought settlers back time and again – Santiago's population of just under a million trails only that of Santo Domingo – even after destruction by various earthquakes, invading armies and fires.

Founded in 1504 as a mining town and demolished by an earthquake in 1562, Santiago has been associated with **tobacco** since it was introduced for export to the French in 1679. The Haitian army slaughtered most residents during an 1805 invasion, but the city was again rebuilt and served for the rest of the century as transport hub for tobacco headed to Puerto Plata and Germany. During this time *merengue périco ripao* – the classic Dominican music using accordion, *tambora* and *güira* – evolved in Santiago, and the city has since produced many of the DR's top musicians, giving it a bit of cultural flair amid agriculture's pre-eminence.

Cibao tobacco

Tobacco was first cultivated (and given its name) by the Tainos, who pressed the leafy plant into a rock-hard substance to be smoked in pipes. Many Cibao peasants still make this form of tobacco – called *andullo* – which you can find if you ask around in Tamboril, Navarrete or Villa González (see box, p.228); it's sometimes even for sale in local *colmados*. **Export** began in 1679, when Cibao farmers started growing it for the French colony on the western side of the island. For two centuries, Dominican tobacco was widely praised as top quality, but when large-scale export to Germany for cigarette filler began in the mid-nineteenth century, that quality soon began to erode.

Tobacco was traditionally farmed by local peasants, who grew small plots of it alongside their vegetable gardens and sold the dried leaves to local middlemen for cash, who then transported it to Puerto Plata and sold it at a profit to large German export firms. When the US took over customs receipts in 1907, the Germans imposed tariffs that eradicated the old market, and many of the former middlemen opened **cigar factories** for export to the US. Cigar quality wasn't first-rate, though, until the Cuban revolution sent many prominent Havana tobacco men to the Cibao, where they developed an industry that today sells more cigars than Cuba's, and just as good ones. During the 1990s, many small-scale businessmen tried to take advantage of the high profile of Dominican cigars by opening up factories of their own, but they had a hard time matching the quality of more established firms; most have now gone out of business.

If you're in the region to **purchase cigars**, don't be surprised to find that many of the best-known DR brands are not readily available locally. This is because companies dedicated to export are usually not involved or interested in regional distribution. The bad news is that this puts the visitor in the difficult position of identifying good quality without the benefit of recognizable brand names. The good news is that regional product is often as good or even better than the famous brand names, and usually much cheaper because of its anonymity. If you're not a connoisseur, though, and are looking to buy cigars without first smoking a tester, there are two nationally available brands that shouldn't let you down: **Carbonell** and **León Jimenes**. The latter also markets a secondary quality brand widely available called **Aurora**. All three are respectable, consistent in quality, reasonably priced, and should be available for purchase nearly everywhere.

There's also a good club scene, based mostly around this indigenous music, so you won't lack for fun at nights. Otherwise, it's worthwhile to spend a few days, probably no more, browsing around **downtown Santiago** and its surrounding barrios. Downtown holds the most of interest, in both busy street life and a couple of fine **museums** devoted to folkloric art and architecture. On the edge of the city centre looms the mighty **Monumento a los Héroes de la Restauración**, visible from pretty much anywhere in the city. Further out, you can opt for a few nice factory tours, either to check out the local tobacco product or to see how **rum** is made.

Arrival and information

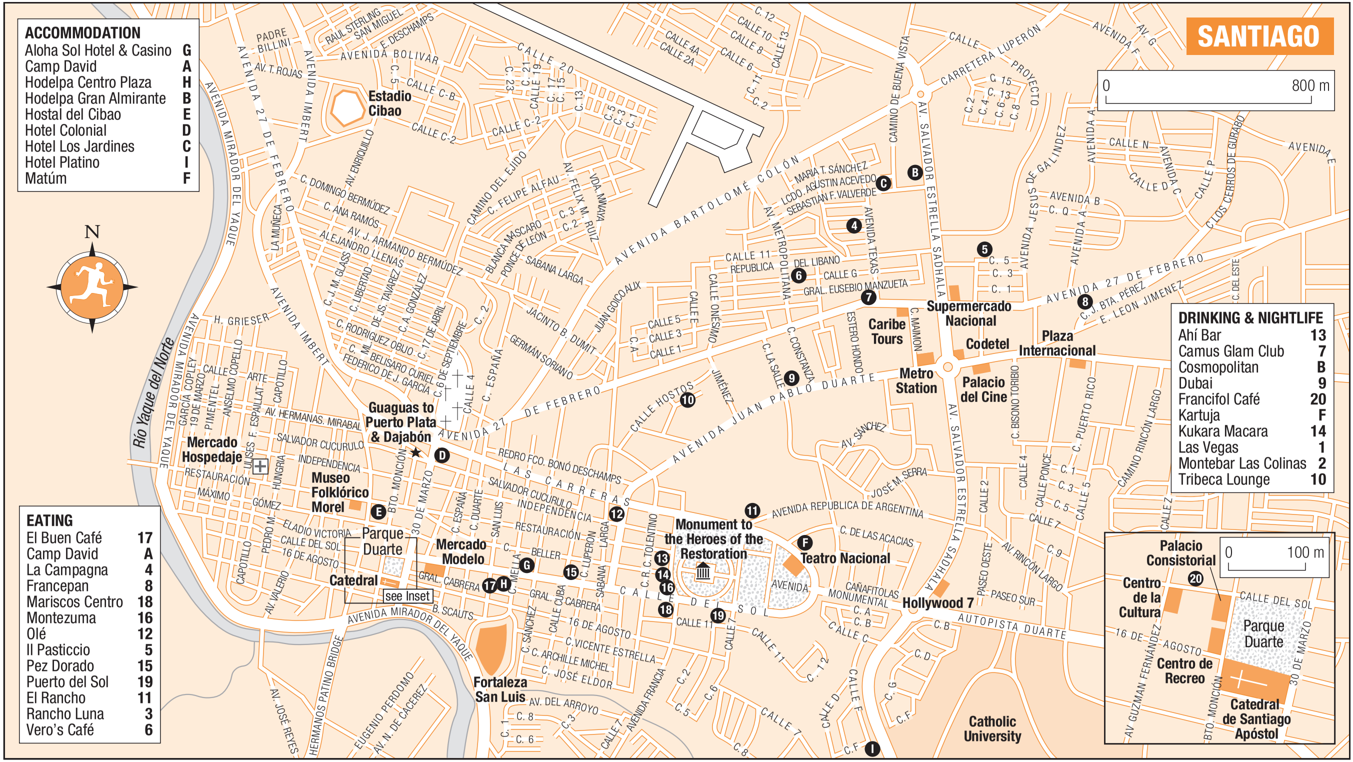
The **Cibao International Airport** (☎582-4894) is just a 20min drive from the city or a US$20 **taxi** ride. The only current **domestic flight** is by Dominican Shuttles (Ⓦwww.dominicanshuttles.com) from Punta Cana on a Monday morning, returning from Santiago the same day. You're more likely, though, to be arriving by land; all three highway entrances to town – the Autopista Duarte, the Carretera Duarte and the Carretera Turística – lead directly to the city centre.

The two main **bus** companies have bases in Santiago; Caribe Tours has two stations, one at the northwest end of town on 27 de Febrero and Las Américas

❶, ❷, Puerto Plata (90km) & Monte Cristi (117km)

Carretera Turística, ❸ & Ⓐ

Léon Jimenes Tabacalera (200m) & Centro León (1km)


SANTIAGO
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800 m
N
Estadio Cibao
Supermercado Nacional
Caribe Tours
Metro Station
Codetel
Palacio del Cine
Plaza Internacional
Guaguas to Puerto Plata & Dajabón
Mercado Hospedaje
Museo Folklórico Morel
Parque Duarte
Catedral
see Inset
Mercado Modelo
Monument to the Heroes of the Restoration
Teatro Nacional
Hollywood 7
Fortaleza San Luis
Catholic University
Río Yaque del Norte
Avenida Mirador del Yaque
Avenida 27 de Febrero
Avenida Imbert
Avenida Bartolomé Colón
Av. Salvador Estrella Sadhala
Avenida Juan Pablo Duarte
Avenida Las Carreras
Avenida Republica de Argentina
Autopista Duarte
Carretera Luperón
Palacio Consistorial
Centro de la Cultura
Centro de Recreo
Catedral de Santiago Apóstol
0
100 m
Calle del Sol
30 de Marzo
16 de Agosto
Bto. Monción
Av Guzman Fernández

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Camp David	A
Hodelpa Centro Plaza	H
Hodelpa Gran Almirante	B
Hostal del Cibao	E
Hotel Colonial	D
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S. José de las Matas

Santo Domingo

(ⓣ576-0790), in the barrio of Las Colinas, the other further east along 27 de Febrero, in Los Jardines (ⓣ241-1414), round the corner from the Metro Tours' station on J.P. Duarte and Maimón (ⓣ582-9111, ⓦwww.metroserviciosturisticos.com). From these locations you can take a taxi (around RD$120) to the city centre. Both companies have numerous daily departures north to **Puerto Plata** and south to **Santo Domingo**. The Caribe Tours service from Santo Domingo to Dajabón (three times daily) via Monte Cristi also picks up and drops off passengers in Santiago. To get to **Samaná** you'll need to get to San Francisco de Macorís by guagua to connect with one of the two morning Caribe Tours buses to the peninsula, or take guaguas the rest of the way from there.

The main **guagua stations** lie on the corner of 30 de Marzo and Cucurullo, heading to Puerto Plata (until 7pm) and Dajabón via Monte Cristi (until 8pm), and also to Mao and Monción, and on Calle Valerio a block west of Parque Valerio heading to San José de las Matas. Guaguas to and from La Vega, San Francisco de Macorís and Salcedo leave from the park on the corner of Sabana Large and Restauración.

La Información (ⓦwww.lainformacionrd.net) is Santiago's major daily **newspaper**, with useful local phone numbers on the second page, a listing of events and a cinema schedule. The **tourism office** has now moved to Parque Duarte; though they're friendly, they have little in the way of information likely to be relevant to your stay.

City transport

Públicos should cover most city transport needs; a one-way ride should cost around RD$30. They are recognizable by the large letter on the windscreen. Route A is probably the most useful one that passes by Parque Duarte and runs up Calle del Sol and then along Avenida 27 de Febrero. **Private taxis** wait at the city parks, though you can call directly for pick-up: reliable operators include Camino (ⓣ971-7788) and Servi (ⓣ971-6737). You shouldn't need to pay more than RD$150 for anywhere fairly central. Taxis are advisable at night, especially if you're on your own. If you intend to explore the surrounding countryside, you might consider **renting a car**; several agencies have offices in the city (see Listings).

Accommodation

Given that Santiago is the country's second city, the place is not as well set up for **accommodation** as you might expect. Though there is good choice at the higher end of the scale, with a range of comfortable business hotels, mid-range options are lacking and the two budget establishments listed below are not particularly appetizing though they are the best available. They are also both located in a neighbourhood where caution should be exercised at night.

Aloha Sol Del Sol 50 ⓣ583-0090, ⓦwww.alohasol.com. Modern hotel with a/c, cable TV, minibar and great hot showers, although the rooms are quite small; it's worth paying the extra RD$100 for a larger "executive superior" room. It's right in the centre of the shopping district and a good alternative for those who want comfortable accommodation but can't afford the *Hodelpa Gran Almirante*. Free wi-fi, breakfast included. ⑥

Camp David Carretera Turística Km 12 ⓣ276-6400, ⓦwww.campdavidranch.com. A one-time Trujillo mountain home turned hotel and restaurant that's popular with wealthy Dominicans and a top choice for those who want to stay out of the city centre. Many of the large, restful rooms have balconies with stunning views over the city. A museum on site houses many of the former dictator's cars, including the one in which he was assassinated. It can get chilly at night, so bring extra layers. ⑦

Hodelpa Centro Plaza Mella 54 ⓣ581-7000, ⓦwww.hodelpa.com. Recently renovated, this spacious hotel enjoys an ideal central location, with huge rooms and all the amenities you could wish for including a gym, a spa, an excellent top-floor restaurant (great views) and a casino. Large buffet breakfast included. Regular special offers make it even more attractive. ⑦

Hodelpa Gran Almirante Av Estrella Sadhalá and Calle 10 Ⓣ580-1992, Ⓦwww.hodelpa.com. Despite its rather bland exterior, this is terribly elegant inside with a huge, white-marble-clad lobby. Set in a wealthy northeastern suburb, the hotel boasts two excellent restaurants and a large adjoining casino. Best of all it has a fabulous rooftop sundeck complete with a decent-sized infinity pool, jacuzzi and bar, offering superlative city and mountain views. If you've got the money, this is the place to stay. ⑧

Hostal del Cibao Monción 40 Ⓣ581-7775. Though possessing a central location, this inexpensive and modest hostel could do with a lick of paint. Rooms are fairly gloomy but generally clean with fan, TV and tepid showers. There's a tiny shared kitchen, fridge-freezer and balcony. Note that the place is locked tight after the reception-shop shuts downstairs though you should be able to reach a caretaker by ringing the doorbell, tucked just inside the gate. As with the *Colonial*, you should take care late at night. ③

Hotel Colonial Cucurullo 109 Ⓣ247-3122, Ⓔcolonialdeluxe@yahoo.com. The rooms are clean, with TV and fan or a/c, albeit a bit small and dark. It's cheap and central, though the neighbourhood is not particularly safe at night. The newer, ambitiously named *Colonial Deluxe* wing next door has slightly nicer rooms for a little extra. ②

Hotel Los Jardines Av Texas and Calle 10 Ⓣ276-8222, Ⓦwwwhotellosjardinesrd.com. The cheapest rooms are pretty small but with great beds and the usual business trimmings – minibar, wi-fi, safe. Breakfast is included and there's a roof terrace. ⑥

Hotel Platino Av Estrella Sadhalá Ⓣ724-7576, Ⓦwww.hotelplatinord.com. One of the better mid-range choices. The rooms are pleasantly furnished – though the cheaper ones are rather small – with a/c, minibars, TVs and internet, and there's a cosy restaurant. ⑤

The City

Most places of interest are **downtown** and within walking distance of one another; in fact, many visitors spend their whole stay in the area bounded by the monument and the main city square, Parque Duarte. The outer **barrios** hold a couple of attractions worth the effort, though they're spread out enough that you're best off taking a taxi.

The monument and around

Defining the eastern boundary of downtown is the gleaming white **Monumento a los Héroes de la Restauración** (Mon–Sat 9am–noon & 2–5pm; free), Santiago's most impressive sight. Built by Trujillo in honour of himself, it was quickly rededicated on his death to the soldiers who lost their lives in the War of Independence with Spain, and the statue of the dictator at its base hastily removed. Another statue, personifying Victory as a woman, sits atop its 70m pillar, her arms extended martially towards the sky. The monument is perched on top of a hill, making it visible from most of the city, which locals say was originally intended to symbolize the omnipresence of the secret police.

The area surrounding the monument used to be rather rowdy, particularly after dark, but following a thorough refurbishment and general sprucing up in 2007, it's much more welcoming and can be reached via a new stairway – lined with palm trees – or a wheelchair-accessible ramp, while around it three small plazas are dedicated to Santiago's traditions, writers and baseball team. Come nightfall the area becomes a popular meeting point and the tower is illuminated while a few snack bars open at its base.

During the day, it's possible to climb the stairs to the top of the monument to take in the breathtaking **panorama** of Santiago and the surrounding valley and mountains. The inside is given over to a small museum of the 1863–65 War of Restoration, and a large **mural** by Vela Zanetti, a social-realist influenced by Diego Rivera, who was forced to leave the country after ignoring Trujillo's request that his painting be a direct tribute to the dictator. The mural depicts Dominican peasants, labourers and soldiers winding up the monument's circular stairway in arduous pursuit of liberty; though much of it is covered to prevent further deterioration, you can see portions of it as you clamber to the top.

Just east of the monument is the palatial **Gran Teatro del Cibao** (Ⓣ583-1150), a rectangle of Italian marble built by President Balaguer in the 1980s. Its main auditorium seats 1500 people and has near-perfect acoustics. Unfortunately, the majority of Santiago residents can't afford the hefty ticket prices, so the large hall goes mostly unused. There are, though, a couple of opera productions per year, with occasional merengue concerts, chamber music and theatre in the smaller concert hall. Across the street from the theatre the sprawling **Catholic University**, Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestro, or "Pucamaima" as it's best known, caters to the area's wealthy students and is set on an attractive, wooded campus.

Centro León

The most compelling attraction in the area – and in all of Santiago for that matter – is the **Centro León**, 27 de Febrero 146, just east of Avenida Estrella Sadhalá in Villa Progreso (Tues–Sun 10am–7pm; RD$100, Tues free; Ⓣ582-2315, Ⓦwww.centroleon.org.do). Opened in 2003, this outstanding, multifaceted cultural centre is housed in an ostentatiously postmodern building – all concrete, glass and angles – surrounded by neat gardens dotted with palms. It's a huge place, divided into four large sections. **Section one** is home to a museum of history and anthropology detailing the story of the Dominican peoples, examining the population's various conflicts, ethnic diversity and growing sense of national identity, as well as the impact people have had on the country's ecosystems and natural resources. The highlight is the remarkable collection of Taino artefacts, including a host of intact aboriginal necklaces, *cemi* statuettes, decorated pots, daggers, axe-heads and vomit sticks, used to induce vomiting after a large banquet.

Section two is devoted to a superb Dominican art collection. Notable works include local Modernist masterpieces like Jaime Colson's folk-Cubist *Hombre con Pipa* and Celeste Woss y Gil's imposing self-portrait *Autorretrato con Cigarillo*, as well as more abstract works such as Paul Guidicelli's Expressionist depiction of a *Vodú* priest sacrificing a chicken, *Brujo Disfrazado de Pájaro*. The **third section** is set aside for the temporary exhibitions, concerts and film screenings that take place throughout the year, while the fourth is devoted to a display on the lives of the León Jimenes family, whose tobacco and alcohol wealth paid for the centre – they're the owners of Aurora cigars and Presidente beer. The highlight here is the mock tobacco factory, set up to look like one from the turn of the twentieth century, where you can observe cigars being made and sample a stogie afterwards. In addition, the centre is home to a good **café**, pleasant gardens adorned with statues and a **gift shop** where you can buy replica Taino artefacts.

Parque Duarte

Calle del Sol, which borders the monument to the south, heads west where it becomes the city's major shopping district and the heart of downtown activity, lined with department stores, banks and pavement stalls selling clothing, household wares and fast food. Follow Del Sol west to 30 de Marzo and you'll pass through the heart of the city before arriving at **Parque Duarte**, a fine tree-covered square that tends to be crowded with people throughout the day – shoppers, shoeshine boys, "guides" who'll start telling you about the city and implore you to follow them (be polite but firm with your refusals) and the unemployed, who often wait here en masse to be picked up by one of the local building contractors when work becomes available. **Horse-and-carriage rides** up to the monument and back run from here; the price is negotiable, but expect to pay around RD$600 return. At the park's southern end stands the **Catedral de Santiago Apóstol**, a cream-coloured, concrete building completed in 1895 with intricate carvings on its mahogany portals and stained-glass windows by contemporary Dominican artist Rincón Mora. The marble tomb of nineteenth-century dictator Ulises Heureaux is in the sanctuary. At the time of writing the cathedral was closed for restoration.

Lining the west side of the park are two of downtown's more attractive buildings: the **Centro de Recreo** – an ornate Moorish-style mansion built a century ago and today a private social club – and the **Palacio Consistorial** (Tues–Fri 10am–noon & 2–5.30pm, Sat & Sun 10am–2pm; free), a renovated gingerbread house that was once the city hall but now hosts a small museum documenting Santiago's history, mostly through photographs.

Around Parque Duarte

Around the corner on Calle del Sol and Monción sits the nondescript **Centro de la Cultura**, home of the highly regarded School of Fine Arts, with regular opera, theatre and chamber music productions in its auditorium.

To the east of the square, narrow pedestrianized **Gral Cabrera**, packed with stalls overflowing with cheap clothes, shoes and toiletries, leads 100m to the **Mercado Modelo**, a covered tourist market with its main entrance on Calle del Sol. Inside are stalls selling cigars, amber and larimar jewellery, and bottles of Mama Juana, the country's famed aphrodisiac-cum-cure-all.

Just south of Parque Duarte, a busy bypass looks down onto **Río Yaque del Norte**, whose bare banks provide a stark memorial to the ferocious power of nature. This stretch of the river had long been lined with the shacks and houses of one of the city's numerous slums. But nearly all of them were destroyed by the combined effects of tropical storms Noel and Olga in 2007, compounded by human error. When Olga hit land in early December – one of the latest tropical storms ever recorded – the authorities, fearing for nearby Tavera Dam, opened its floodgates sending a twenty-metre wall of water hurtling down the river and into the city, where it destroyed over 3500 homes and claimed at least a dozen lives.

Museo Folklórico de Tomás Morel

A few blocks northwest of Parque Duarte, the fascinating **Museo Folklórico de Tomás Morel**, Restauración 174 (Mon–Fri 9am–noon & 3–6pm; free; ☎582-6787), is somewhat misleadingly pitched as a house of horrors. The dilapidated condition of the exterior does nothing to alter this expectation, but inside is a remarkable collection of papier-mâché **Carnival masks**, alongside various Taino artefacts, and a faded sixteenth-century painting of the Virgin Mary. Hidden among the scattered exhibits are the Republic's first telephone, first television and

Santiago festivals

Santiago is one of the country's prime places to celebrate **Carnival**. Festivities take place every Sunday in February at the monument with throngs of costumed participants wearing colourful papier-mâché demon masks and assaulting each other with inflated sheep bladders; don't wear anything that you feel too precious about. Things culminate on **Independence Day** (February 27), when the entire city comes out for a parade around the monument, accompanied by mobile freak shows, home-made floats and Haitian *gagá* bands. If the local baseball team wins the Caribbean Series Championship, the partying lasts for another week. The local **fiesta patronal**, in honour of patron saint Santiago Apóstol, is held on July 22 and features dancing, drinking and live music in an outdoor bandshell beside the monument.

an accordion that once belonged to Nico Lora, often thought of as the father of merengue. The masks, though, are the main focus, with an array of spectacularly baroque and evil-looking demons from La Vega, the simpler but no less malevolent *Cimarrón diablos* of Cabral, and several specimens from politically oriented San Cristóbal – including one with a skin of American flags and nuclear missiles in place of bull horns. The original proprietor was a local poet and folklorist but, following his death in 1992, his nephew took over. If it's not too busy he'll wander around with you giving you an interesting commentary in Spanish. The museum is also something of a hangout for local artists and intellectuals.

Mercado Hospedaje

Taking up most of the western end of downtown, on the corner of 16 de Agosto and Espaillat, is the enormous outdoor **Mercado Hospedaje**, the city's largest agricultural market and a fascinating place to wander around, although the attraction may not be that obvious at first. The roads leading in are lined with huge bins full of beans, corn, bananas, tobacco, oregano, garlic and cassava, but these do little to capture the real atmosphere inside, which has an almost timeless, mystic feel to it. Within the market, the local **botánica** sells portraits of *Santería* saints and potions whipped up on the spot for every conceivable malady, while in hidden back rooms it's possible to get your **tarot cards** read for a small fee.

The outer barrios

Santiago's **outer barrios** are an uneven mix of heavy industry and residential neighbourhoods; with the exception of wealthy **Los Jardines** (home to the *Hodelpa Gran Almirante* hotel), they should be explored exclusively during the day. The first place to head is the cigar factory of **E. León Jimenes Tabacalera** (see p.216), home of the Aurora brand, on Avenida 27 de Febrero (Mon–Sat 9.30am–5pm, closed Sun; free; ☎241-1111). You can watch cigars being hand rolled, after which you're escorted to a deluxe smoking room to receive a free cigar, accompanied by Presidente on tap (the company also owns the ubiquitous beer brand). On the whole, it's not as extensive a tour as you'll get at the Centro León, but at least it's a real, working tobacco factory.

Pueblo Nuevo

Another factory that offers tours – though service is less attentive – is the **Bermúdez rum plant**, Libertad and Armando Bermúdez (Mon–Fri 9am–noon & 2–4pm; free; ☎276-1852), in Pueblo Nuevo, 10km northwest of the centre. They don't get as many visitors as the Brugal plant in Puerto Plata, so you're likely to get a private tour of the processing, bottling and packing operations, perhaps followed by a complimentary *Cuba libre*. From the plant it's just a short walk west to a far more enticing attraction, **Estadio Cibao** on Avenida Imbert and Domingo Bermúdez (☎575-1810), Santiago's professional baseball stadium, which is the largest in the country. Winter season lasts from mid-November to early February and it's best to book tickets in advance as the bigger games can sell out. Check local newspapers for schedules. Nearby, at Armando Bermúdez and 6 de Diciembre, sits the large **Mercado Central**. Locals come here to buy produce, household wares and clothes and while you won't find any souvenirs it's a good opportunity for a behind-the-scenes glimpse of local commerce. From here you can round off a tour of the neighbourhood by heading a block west to the **municipal cemetery**, 27 de Febrero and 6 de Diciembre (daily 8.30am–5.30pm), a maze of garish marble statuary and small syncretist altars that hold statuettes of the deceased alongside tools of their trade. A **market** is held round the southern and western edges of the cemetery on Thursday mornings.

Pueblo Nuevo is also the place to come if you're interested in going to the source for Carnival masks, as it's home to Santiago's most esteemed mask-maker, Angelo Leonardo Cabrera – otherwise known as "El Mambo". Ask anyone on the streets of Pueblo Nuevo for "Angelo" and they'll direct you to his house, where he will gladly show you around his colourful workshop. You can purchase a mask for the relatively cheap price of between RD$1000–1500. Make sure that the taxi waits for you while you visit.

Jacagua

Ten kilometres northwest of town and accessible only by car are the ruins of **Jacagua** – sixteenth-century Santiago – worth a visit only if you don't have the time to visit the more extensive ones at La Vega Vieja (see p.229). You're free to wander the large private plantation that holds the numerous scattered stone foundations and crumbling walls, many of them pockmarked by weeds, though it's difficult to get any real sense of the town's layout from what's left. Conceived as a gold-mining outpost, old Santiago quickly transformed into an agricultural hub before being swallowed in a catastrophic earthquake in the late sixteenth century, after which the city was moved to its present location. If you'd like to see what's left, take Avenida Estrella Sadhalá west until you reach the "Plazanutty" sign at the Carretera Jacagua, where you need to head north. A left turn at the fork in the road leads you 2km to the ruins.

Eating

As befits such a large city, you'll have no problem finding **food**, whether it's at fine dining establishments, low-key *comedores* or American fast-food chains. Many of the top spots are clustered in the wealthy barrio **Los Jardines**, near the *Hodelpa Gran Almirante*, but good, moderately priced options also abound near the monument and Catholic University. If you need to stock up on **groceries**, try the huge Supermercado Nacional on Estrella Sadhalá, or La Sirena, tucked away at the bottom end of Calle del Sol, near Parque Duarte.

El Buen Café San Luis and Del Sol. This small, friendly café is about the only budget place in the city centre that will serve you breakfast – fresh juices, omelettes, sandwiches, coffee and toast – with fajitas, burritos and simple dishes on the lunch menu, for under RD$200. If you don't want your sandwich smothered in ketchup, let them know first. Closed Sun.

Camp David Carretera Turística Km 12 ☎223-0666. Former Trujillo mountain home, now converted into a gourmet restaurant and hostelry (see p.218) that offers a long list of choice seafood dishes and steaks (mains from RD$500) and some fantastic views. Look for the turnoff on the Carretera Turística, then drive up a winding road for 2km.

La Campagna Plaza Matilde, Av Texas. A top-quality bakery and sandwich shop with three branches spread across the city – the others are on Av J.P. Duarte and Av J.A. Bermúdez. It does a very good *cubano* and offers free wi-fi.

Francepan Av 27 de Febrero. Pleasant café set back from the road, with a tiled, open-sided patio offering delicious soups, salads, deli-sandwiches and burgers plus all the goodies from the on-site bakery. Popular with middle-class families, drawn by the kids' menu and convenient parking. Daily until 8pm; weekends until midnight.

Mariscos Centro Del Sol and Av Francia. Slightly overpriced fish restaurant tucked away just down from the monument but with a congenial atmosphere, especially at lunchtime, and a bar carved like the prow of a ship. Try the *mero* in orange and triple sec (RD$420). Daily from noon.

Montezuma Av Francia and Beller, in front of the monument. The best Mexican food in town, served in a relatively plush two-storey setting. The fajitas are great but you're best off splurging on a heaped plate of grilled *camarones* smothered in garlic. They also have Corona and Dos Equis, which are hard to find elsewhere. Daily from 10am.

Olé J.P. Duarte and Independencia. Popular restaurant pizzeria under new management and being renovated at the time of writing but still with a great people-watching location overlooking a park and close to the city centre.

Il Pasticcio El Llano at C 3 ⓦwww.ilpasticcio.net. Home-made pasta (RD$230 to 420) reigns supreme in this classy Bohemian Italian restaurant, filled with original artworks – even on the ceiling. Porcini mushrooms are among the kitchen's many fresh ingredients. Don't forget to leave room for the divine *tiramisú*. From 7pm; closed Mon.

Pez Dorado Del Sol at Parque Altagracia. The granddaddy of elite Santiago dining, this institution has been around since the 1950s. High-end, expensive *comida criolla* in a dark formal environment, including such tasty dishes as chicken with garlic, cilantro and olives, octopus, garlic shrimp, sea bass and also excellent Chinese offerings and an extensive wine list. Mains generally RD$625–850. Daily from noon.

Puerto del Sol Del Sol at the monument. This hip establishment provides comfy lounge sofas and a wall of sports screens, plus tasty food and very cold beer served on a crowded open-air patio with a memorable shot of the monument and great people-watching. No Presidente beer as it's owned by a rival beer distributor.

El Rancho Argentina ⓣ226-3039. The city's best steakhouse occupies a fine-looking dining room just north of the monument. A standard steak, accompanied by rice and beans, should set you back around RD$400, or you can pay RD$1000 to tackle a 16oz monster. Some seafood choices also available.

Rancho Luna Carretera Turística Km 7 ⓣ736-7176. Top-quality steakhouse and piano bar situated on the hill below *Camp David*, with excellent service, a huge wine list and great views over the city. Main courses start at RD$400.

Vero's Café Metropolitana and Libano. Cosy café tucked away on a small plant-filled patio, with wooden picnic furniture and free wi-fi. A great spot for an early evening drink or a light bite – wedges, garlic bread and empanadas or more substantial dishes and even sushi – with classic American rock music in the background. From 6pm; closed Mon.

Drinking and nightlife

Santiago's **nightlife** is rowdy and diverse, but, a few places aside, pretty much over by midnight during the week and by 2am on Friday and Saturday. Clubs, from cavernous to cramped, fill the city, offering a steady stream of **live music**. You'll also find plenty of enjoyable neighbourhood watering holes, especially around the monument. Most clubs and bars lie within a reasonable distance of one another, making it easy to hit two or three in a night. Be aware that prostitution is rife in several places – the aptly named *Passions* is probably one to steer clear of. If you're in the mood for a more low-key evening, there are several multi-screen **cinemas** (see opposite). Some films are in Spanish, but many more are in English with subtitles. The *Centro Plaza*, *Gran Almirante*, *Aloha Sol* and *Hotel Matúm* all have **casinos**.

Ahí Bar Restauración 71. Lively bar just west of the monument with a tree-shaded outdoor terrace that is the place to wind down at the end of the day. It's also a good place to grab food before the dancing begins over the road at the *Ice Box*, offering a reasonable menu of Mexican and seafood staples. Free wi-fi. From 4pm (noon on Sat & Sun).

Camus Glam Club Plaza Metropolitana, Av 27 de Febrero. Attracts a very young and super-fashionable crowd – anyone over 30 is going to feel it. Its tiny dancefloor playing plenty of electronica can get extremely crowded on weekends when the clientele becomes very much cheek by jowl. Closed Mon and Tues.

Cosmopolitan *Hodelpa Gran Almirante*, Av Estrella Sadhalá and Calle 10. One of the best bars for new travellers in town, as it's very safe and approachable. Latino sounds dominate. Dress sharp.

Dubai Plaza Zona Rosa, Salle. Attracts a young hip crowd with a playlist that alternates American hits with more hardcore slices of merengue, salsa, hip-hop and reggaeton. On weekends the patrons are here as much to be seen as to dance. Closed Mon and Tues.

Francifol Café Del Sol 127 at Parque Duarte. A classy and recently refurbished bar in a busy downtown area. Looks more like a nightclub, but it still has some of the coldest beer around and is an excellent place for drinks and conversation. Plays mainly Anglophone pop, rock and electronica. From 6.30pm.

Kartuja *Matúm Hotel*, Las Carreras 1. Currently enjoying a spike in popularity as its hotel location seems to exempt it from the weekend licensing laws that apply to private clubs and bars, and consequently doesn't shut till 4am. The crowd is older and less self-consciously stylish than at *Dubai* or *Camus Glam Club*.

Kukara Macara Av Francia in front of the monument. A camp classic with its giant cacti, waiters in full cowboy regalia and replica stagecoach above the door, this club clearly takes its Wild West theme very seriously. It's a lot of fun with two open-air floors, plus great Mexican food.

Montebar Las Colinas Av 27 de Febrero. A heaving *típico* disco with tables surrounding a central dancefloor. The place to hear genuine merengue and bachata, especially when it's hosting live bands. You'll need a taxi to get you there and back.

Tribeca Lounge M. Alvarez 8. Hip nightclub geared toward the wealthy young college crowd, with the slick, dark feel of the New York City neighbourhood after which it's named. Live merengue band on Thurs (RD$300) and open bar on Sun. Closed Mon and Tues.

Las Vegas Autopista Navarrete Km 8. Old-school Dominican disco with famous live musicians on their listings.

Listings

Ambulance Ⓣ911 for emergency or Ⓣ583-4311 for private ambulance.

Banks and currency exchange There are several banks on Calle del Sol with 24-hour ATM machines, including Banco Popular, Del Sol and Sánchez, and Scotia Bank.

Car hire Established firms include Adventure, at the airport (Ⓣ612-5494, Ⓦwww.adventurerentcar.com); Budget, at the airport (Ⓣ233-8230, Ⓦwww.budget.com); and Nelly, Av JP Duarte (Ⓣ582-7997, Ⓦwww.nellyrac.com), or at the airport (Ⓣ233-8177).

Cinemas Modern multiplex venues are in the Palacio del Cine and Plaza Internacional, both on Av JP Duarte (see map) though the cheapest seats are to be found in Hollywood 7 on Av Estrella Sadhalá.

Hospital If you have a medical emergency, head to Centro Médico Cibao, Av JP Duarte just west of Las Carreras or Clínica Corominas, Restauración 57 (Ⓣ580-1171); you can also call Ⓣ911 for other emergencies.

Internet There are numerous internet cafés around town, including Internet Yudith, Calle 16 de Agosto, a place next door to the *Hostal del Cibao* (which you can also make calls from) and *Café Decano*, Av Estrella Sadhalá by the *Platino* hotel. Several of the city's hotels, restaurants and shopping plazas now offer free wi-fi access.

Laundry Joseph Cleaners, Las Carreras and JP Duarte (Ⓣ583-4880).

Pharmacy Farmacia Carol on Av Estrella Sadhalá is open 24 hours. Also good is Farmacia San Luis, San Luis 61 and Independencia (Mon–Sat 7.30am–9pm, Sun 9am–6pm; Ⓣ247-6494).

Police Main office is at Sabana Larga and Calle del Sol (Ⓣ582-2331). Call Ⓣ911 for emergencies.

Post office Main office is at Calle del Sol and San Luis. EPS, Hostos 3 and Bidó (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat 9am–noon).

Telephone You can make international calls from Codetel on 16 de Agosto between Mella and Sánchez; Televimenca, Av JP Duarte and Independencia; Tricom, San Luis 34, and at Av 27 de Febrero and Estero Hondo.

Travel agents Abby Tours, Sabana Larga 117 (Ⓣ971-7045); Gómez Tours, 27 de Febrero (Ⓣ575-6115).

Around Santiago

In Santiago's immediate vicinity, the urban sprawl quickly peters out into tobacco farmland, and the villages that exist to support this agriculture are not really set up for visitors – or worth your time.

There are a couple of places, however, that attract the occasional visitor: one is the tiny pueblo **HIGUERITO**, 8km south of Santiago just off the Autopista Duarte. Widely hyped as a pottery centre, it comes across as a bit tacky, its many shops filled to the brim with endless faceless ceramic dolls for which the village is famous. If you want to bring home some pieces of folk art, you're better off with Carnival masks from La Vega or visiting the Artisans' Fair in Salcedo during the summer.

In the opposite direction, heading north from Santiago towards Sosúa and Puerto Plata, the **Carretera Turística** is incredibly scenic, weaving up into the lush, rolling mountains of the Cordillera Septentrional, but also hard going – narrow, windy and heavily potholed. Nine kilometres along, **LA CUMBRE** is home to the largest system of amber mines in the world, a setting (and inspiration) for the movie *Jurassic Park*. Several roadside souvenir stalls mark its location; to reach the actual mines take the turnoff marked "La Cumbre de Juan Vegas" and continue west for 3km. From there it's an easy hike up a winding path to the mountain's summit, from which you can see the entire Cibao valley and – far in the distance – a slice of the Atlantic Ocean.

From the summit it's another 500m down to the hole that serves as the main mine entrance. The mines are extremely basic, just deep holes in the ground supported by rickety wooden frames, with an extensive network of tunnels leading under the mountain from the bottom of the pit. The miners – who work underground by candlelight – will sell you chunks of amber (though this is technically illegal). Note that after heavy rains the mines will often be closed – even to the miners. If you need to stop to fortify yourself for the journey, the *Rancho Cumbre* in La Cumbre does a mean steak, and offers great views out over the mountains.

San José de las Matas

The easiest excursion into the mountains from Santiago is **SAN JOSÉ DE LAS MATAS**, a sleepy hill-station looking out over the northern Cordillera Central, here packed with palm trees and coffee plantations. In part it's so quiet because the town has the country's highest per capita rate of immigration to the US; many of those who stay at home are supported by relatives in New York. San José is a great starting-off point for several day-hikes and an arduous five-day round-trip trail to Pico Duarte (see p.235), and is particularly interesting during the **fiesta patronal** – held during the first week of August – when hundreds of relatives return from the States for the festivities, and during Christmas, when there's a candlelit procession on horseback at night.

There's little to do within town but take a leisurely walk and admire the views; for one such lookout, take the dirt path behind the post office, on 30 de Marzo, to a **cliff-top park** with a good vantage point over the neighbouring mountains. Most viewpoints and natural swimming holes lie several kilometres outside San José, with the best *balneario* – La Toma del Río Antonsape – at **Mata Grande**, the starting point for the Pico Duarte trek.

Practicalities

If you're arriving from Santiago, it will likely either be by **guagua** (every 45min) or by car – simply head west on Calle 30 de Marzo, cross the Hermanos Patiño Bridge and continue west for 28km. Most visitors choose to make a day-trip of the town, but those looking to stay the night will find a couple of simple **hotels**. *Hotel Restaurant San José*, 30 de Marzo 37 (☎578-8566; ②), is the better one, with basic rooms, ceiling fans and hot water. There are several decent inexpensive **restaurants** serving typical Dominican platters, including *Tropicaribe*, Mella 6, an outdoor patio with the standard range of Dominican dishes, and, a bit further north on Calle San Juan, *Luna*, which boasts a candlelit terrace and serves skilful home cooked *mofongo* along with grilled steaks.

Monción

A scenic but badly deteriorated road leads 26km west from San José to sleepy **MONCIÓN**, a pretty mountain town unremarkable but for a nearby riverside Taino site and proximity to one of the country's better restaurants. If you have the time, you can also take a tour of the **Casabe Doña Mechi** (Mon–Fri 7am–8pm; free; Ⓣ572-2682), a family-run cassava bread factory 3km north of Monción in the town of Cacique. Inside, you'll see the various elaborate contraptions for scraping, washing and grinding the tubers and the enormous ovens in which they are baked into bread; samples are included. This is also where you can hire a guide to take you to **Los Charcos de los Indios**, an eye-popping Taino site that sees precious few visitors and is hard to find. The cassava factory owner's sons are willing to take visitors out there for a modest sum; from the cassava factory, it's a 10min drive and then a 30min hike along a boulder-strewn river to a breathtaking double-waterfall (when it's been raining) with a large, clear swimming hole. Venture another 300m and you'll be rewarded by the Charcos site itself – yet another double-waterfall with a huge, deep swimming pool and high rocks from which local children dive. Towering above the swimming hole is what appears to be a 30m-high totem of a Taino face carved out of the rock. The site has yet to be officially authenticated by Dominican archeologists, since it could possibly be a natural rock formation, though the locals are convinced of its Taino provenance, claiming that the site used to be littered with the remains of a native settlement. If genuine it would be the largest indigenous artefact in the Caribbean.

Practicalities

If you're not visiting San José first, the easiest way to get to Monción is via the paved road that leads from Mao – which is the route **guaguas** from Santiago take – twice the length of the San José road, but just as fast and a much smoother ride.

On the face of it Monción hardly justifies more than a day-trip, but you'll find the locals – who are unused to tourists – extremely hospitable. The main **hotel**, *Las Américas*, Calle Duarte (Ⓣ579-0065; ②), is a definite step up from the usual small and dingy rural establishments, with decent-sized, well-decorated rooms, balconies and comfortable beds. *Restaurante Cacique*, in **Cacique**, 8km north of Monción on Highway 16, is one of the country's pre-eminent restaurants for goat and lamb dishes, all served with the local cassava bread, and very reasonably priced. It's set on a festive outdoor patio and is open daily for lunch; dinner is only served at weekends. If you can't get out to Cacique, settle instead for the *Amigo Café*, on

Cassava bread

Still a staple Dominican food, **cassava bread** dates back to the Tainos. Low in fat and protein but high in carbohydrate, it's baked from a flour produced by grating, draining and then drying the tube-like roots of the bitter yuca plant. Traces of ancient cassava production have been found across the Caribbean and it probably owes its success to the fact that the mother plant, **yuca**, also known as cassava and manioc, grows easily in poor soil and is hardy enough to withstand both drought and hurricanes. The roots are ready to harvest after only ten months but remain useful for up to two years, and the bread, once baked, can be stored indefinitely. Resembling a cracker more than traditionally baked bread, it has little taste of its own but it makes a great side dish with traditional Dominican stews and is delicious served with avocado and salt.

Cigar factories

The fertile soils of the Cibao valley yield some of the world's finest tobacco (see box, p.216). If you're a cigar aficionado, or simply interested in watching the process first-hand, consider a weekday visit (generally 7am–4pm) to one of the various cigar factories in the towns surrounding Santiago.

Tamboril This town 15km east of Santiago is one of the world's most famous cigar towns. The largest operation is Flor Dominicana, Calle Real (☎580-5139), so you should make arrangements beforehand. Smaller Fábrica Anilo de Oro, C Real 85 (☎580-5808), manufacturers of Abreu and Presidente, and Tabacalera Jacagua, Cappelán 13 (☎580-6600), both offer free tours and a free fresh-rolled cigar at the end.

Villa González 15 km northwest of Santiago along the Carretera Duarte, two small-scale factories lie across the highway from each other: Pinar del Río Tabacalera and Túbano's are both used to visitors; you'll get a glimpse of the cigar rollers and then get escorted to the gift shop.

Navarette Just west of Villa González, the Tabaclera Jacagua factory (☎585-5702) on the main park is less geared towards selling cigars to passing tourists and will give you a better sense of the cigar-rolling craft.

Moca, 20km southeast of Santiago, is home to the Tabacalera Anónima, a small cigar factory opposite the police station.

the main drag through Monción, which grills deliciously spiced chicken and offers an immensely popular Sunday lunch buffet.

Heading north or west from Monción are the agricultural towns of **Mao** or **Sabaneta**, respectively. Neither is a particularly compelling tourist destination though you're more likely to find something to hold your interest if you hit a market day.

The Cordillera Central

The mighty **CORDILLERA CENTRAL**, slicing through the Dominican Republic's heart, was sparsely populated during colonial times by communities of slaves in hiding, known as *cimarrones*; as the centuries wore on, the ex-slaves were joined by Cibao valley peasants pushed out of the Vega Real by large landowners. These settlers would cut sections of forest and fence off small agricultural settlements called *conucos*, moving on to another plot once the topsoil had been washed down the side of the hill. This practice carried on into the twentieth century until the national government put a stop to it by setting up three national parks within which farming is illegal, and which now are growing centres of eco tourism. Most of the old *conucos* are returning to wilderness, though a couple have evolved into thriving towns.

For the most part, the mountain roads are horrific, and to head deeper into the range you'll need a **donkey**; blazed trails lead to **Pico Duarte** from five separate points, with stops in secluded alpine valleys Tétero and Bao. On the eastern edge of the valley, the industrial towns of **La Vega** and **Bonao**, both founded by Christopher Columbus, are mid-sized centres of industry with little of interest to visitors most of the year, though La Vega's Carnival is the country's best.

La Vega

La Concepción de la Vega, more commonly referred to as **"LA VEGA"**, just 30km southeast of Santiago, started out as one of Columbus's gold-mining towns, only to be levelled in a sixteenth-century earthquake and rebuilt as a farming community. Aside from the ruins of this old settlement, known as **La Vega Vieja** – well outside town – there's little in today's noisy, concrete city to hold your attention. However, La Vega's **Carnival** celebrations in February are generally acknowledged to be among the most boisterous and authentic in the country. A twenty-block promenade is set up between the two main parks, along which parade platoons of demons in impressively horrific **masks**, the making of which is something of a local specialized craft. Many city-dwellers who spend their days as hotel clerks, bankers or auto mechanics use much of their free time perfecting mask making; in addition to papier-mâché, they often use materials like bull horns, bone and sharpened dogs' teeth. There's the usual stack of blaring loudspeakers and food and liquor vendors to animate and feed the crowds, which average up to seventy thousand each afternoon – many of them watching from rooftops. If you'd like to **purchase a mask**, try *Robert's Restaurant and Car Wash*, on the Carretera La Vega; if they're out of stock, they can direct you to the individual artists; expect to pay at least RD$1000, depending on how elaborate the design is.

Other than half a dozen pretty wooden Victorians scattered about town, the city is crowded with unappealing box-style buildings. This theme leads all the way up to the fascinating **Catedral de la Concepción de La Vega**, Calle Mella at the Parque Central, surely the most subversive piece of architecture in the country, and considered something of a national embarrassment by many. Its team of architects envisioned a people's church built in the same concrete-box mode of most urban dwellings, reflective of the bleak poverty of most of its parishioners. The convoluted main structure is divided into a dozen towers with Gothic portals – note the central cross, fabricated from threaded pipes, and the industrial ornamentation of the facade. There are a few out-of-place colonial elements to the building as well, as it was initially intended (then abandoned) as a celebration of the Columbus Centenary, including brick gun turrets on all sides and the priests' quarters in the back. Across the Parque Central past the matching concrete gazebo, you'll find the **Casa de la Cultura**, Calle Independencia 32 (Mon–Fri 9.30am–noon & 2–5pm; free), with rotating art exhibits and a permanent Carnival mask collection.

Santo Cerro and La Vega Vieja

Five kilometres north of La Vega on the Autopista Duarte, a marked turnoff leads to **Santo Cerro** (Holy Hill), site of an important battle between Columbus and the Tainos. Columbus led an inland expedition in 1494 to round up Tainos to give to his men as slaves. A large company of natives from the valley below attacked his troops here, and, so legend has it, were getting the better of the invaders until Columbus raised a large, wooden cross on the hill; an apparition of the Virgin perched atop it, and the emboldened Europeans slaughtered the enemy. It's hard to imagine a more peaceful spot today, crowned by a beautiful brick church and an unbelievable view of the Vega Real. Within the sanctuary is an imprint purported to be the place where Columbus planted the cross.

Backtrack 100m from the church, and a turnoff west leads down a steep hill lined with crumbling religious statuary. Make a left at the end of the road to reach **La Vega Vieja** (Mon–Sat 9am–noon & 2–5pm; RD$50), the ruins of Columbus's original city, founded in 1494 after the Santo Cerro battle. It went on to become one of the colony's most important mining outposts before the 1562 earthquake. Though protected as a national park, the foundations on display – the fortress, a church, portions of the aqueduct and a few stone houses – make up only a tenth of the original city and are, for the most part, exceedingly overgrown. The **fort** is the most extensive ruin, with several of its walls intact; colonists plundered much more of the stone in the nineteenth century to build the church at Santo Cerro. Five hundred metres east of the main ruins, a partially intact Franciscan **monastery** sits peacefully on a hillside, with most of its outer walls still standing.

Practicalities

Caribe Tours (ⓣ573-6806), which operates fifteen daily connections with Santo Domingo, has a terminal on Avenida Rivas, just off the Autopista Duarte. In the town centre, on Pedro Rivera (close to where it intersects Avenida Rivas) lies the bus station for Expreso Vegano (ⓣ573-4446), which runs a service to and from Santo Domingo. Although Caribe Tours also operates four buses a day from Santo Domingo to Jarabacoa, which stop off at La Vega, more frequent **guaguas** (every 30min, 7am-6pm; RD$70) set off from the corner of 27 de Febrero and Restauración. **Taxis** across town between bus terminals cost around RD$150. For in-town taxi service, call Taxi del Valle (ⓣ573-1313).

Odd for a city of La Vega's size, decent **hotels** are in short supply; many lack even the most basic amenities like a toilet seat, mosquito net or hot water. By far the best option is *Hotel Plaza Rey*, Restauración 3 (ⓣ573-9797, ⓔhotelrey97@hotmail.com; ⑤), with comfortable clean rooms with a/c, cable TV, friendly staff and a decent on-site restaurant dishing up *comida típica*. Otherwise, *San Pedro*, Cáceres 87 (ⓣ573-2844; ②), is the least seedy and the cleanest of the budget options. You'll fare slightly better with local **restaurants**, notably the second-floor patio above Engini Car Wash, Restauración and Cáceres, which has a hip decor, a fun crowd and pool tables; specialities include shrimp vinaigrette and *lambí*. Also good is *Robert's Restaurant and Car Wash*, on the Carretera La Vega across from Caribe Tours, with the city's best breakfasts and passable pizzas later in the day.

You'll find a 24-hour **ATM** machine on the Parque Central, alongside the requisite phone centres.

Jarabacoa

JARABACOA, a mountain resort peppered with coffee plantations, is popular with wealthy Dominicans for its cooler climate. The pine-dominated mountains – dubbed rather inanely "The Dominican Alps" – immediately surrounding the town hold four large waterfalls, several rugged trails fit for day-hikes, three rivers used for whitewater rafting and the busiest starting-point for treks up Pico Duarte.

The town's tiny but expanding grid runs right alongside the pretty Río Yaque del Norte and the area surrounding the town has seen a good deal of development in recent years as a number of new residential communities have been created, both for expats and wealthy Dominicans looking for a mountain retreat.

Arrival and information

Jarabacoa is well served by public transport. Caribe Tours runs four **buses** a day to and from Santo Domingo via La Vega and Bonao from the back of the Esso station in the town centre, which also functions as the guagua depot. **Guaguas** shuttle to and from La Vega (40min), while **públicos** – generally pick-up trucks – bound for Constanza (1hr 45min; RD$150 inside; RD$80 outside) leave from Paseo de los Maestros, diagonally opposite the Shell station. There are approximately six a day though the timetable is fluid. The treacherous dirt road is now being paved at some speed and should be passable in an ordinary saloon car by the time of publication. Guaguas for La Ciénaga leave from the south of the town on Calle Obdulio Jímenez. For a **taxi**, call Jaraba Taxi (ⓣ574-4640).

Most of the action in town can be found around the major crossroads, just after the Esso station and a few blocks north of the small Parque Central; these include a couple of **banks** with **ATMs**, the **post office**, **police station** and three **supermarkets**, one of which has a **pharmacy** attached. Lavandería Jimenoa, opposite *Pizza y Pepperoni*, is a reliable **laundry**. The nicest **internet** café is *Mi Tío Café*, on the corner of Sánchez and Hermanas Mirabel, just off the park, which also serves snacks; the one in Plaza Ramírez is open late.

Accommodation

With the recent increase in visitor numbers, Jarabacoa's **accommodation** options have seen steady improvement over the last decade though none really stand out.

Brisas de Los Alpes C-28, halfway between Jarabacoa and La Vega ⓣ277-8893, ⓦwww.brisasdellosalpesresort.com. Set high in the mountains and surrounded by pine trees, this faux-alpine lodge complex, which includes a decent-sized pool, offers a range of very comfortable apartments and two- and four- person self-catering villas, all with kitchens, cable TV and living rooms. Tours of the area are also offered. ⑤

Brisas del Yaqué Luperón ⓣ574-4490, ⓔhotelbrisasdelyaque@hotmail.com. Clean, modern hotel with very friendly staff. The rooms are quite small but are better furnished than most in that price bracket and come with a/c, cable TV and a small balcony, some offering good mountain views. The best place to stay if you want to be in the action. ④

Brisas del Yaqué II Independencia 13 ⓣ574-2100, ⓔhotelbrisasdelyaque@hotmail.com. Larger, more modern rooms than in the smaller sibling hotel but many overlook the market so are noisy early in the morning; the quieter ones face the carpark. Free wi-fi and friendly staff. ⑤

Guesthouse Jarabacoa Medina ⓣ365-9102, ⓦwww.guesthouse-jarabacoa.com. Two-storey guesthouse set in its own walled grounds in a Jarabacoa suburb, around a 10min walk from the centre. Rooms are modest – as are the prices – but cosy, and the friendly owners can organize tours of the area. Breakfast US$7. They also have new one- and two-bedroom self-catering apartments for rent. ④

Hotel Plaza Central Mario N. Galán ⓣ574-7768. The best budget option in town. The rooms are clean with fans and showers, but otherwise extremely basic, as you'd expect for the price, and being central, it's noisy. ②

Mi Vista C-28, 3km outside Jarabacoa ⓣ574-6696, ⓦwww.mi-vista.com. Good-value mountain resort with five large, pleasant two-bedroom bungalows, with patio views. There's a swimming pool, a lovely open-air terrace restaurant and a whole raft of tours on offer, including-horseriding and mountain biking. ⑥

Rancho Baiguate Road to Constanza Km 5 ⓣ574-6890, ⓦwww.ranchobaiguate.com. Sprawling ranch in woodland surroundings with basic rooms, plus a softball field, basketball court, ping-pong table, swimming pool, horse ranch, fishing pond and organized adventure excursions (see p.232). The perfect place if you're looking for peace and quiet but still want easy access to the town. Price includes three (very mediocre) buffet meals. ⑤

The waterfalls

The real attractions of Jarabacoa are the four local **waterfalls** (*saltos*), not too far from the centre of town, though enough of a trek that you'll want either your own transport or a ride on a *motoconcho* (RD$150 one way). Most popular is the crashing **Lower Salto Jimenoa** or **Salto Jimenoa Dos** (daily 8.30am–7pm; RD$100), which boasts a deep pool good for swimming, staffed by a lifeguard. It's 7km east of town off the Carretera Jarabacoa, and accessible on foot via a rickety suspension bridge, rebuilt after Tropical Storm Olga raged through the area in late 2007.

Salto Baiguate, 1km south of town on the road to Constanza (daily 8.30am–7pm; free), is, at 60m high, a bit taller than Lower Salto Jimenoa, plus it has a large cave and a swimming hole at its base. The steepest Jarabacoa waterfall by far is the **Higher Salto Jimenoa**, or **Salto Jimenoa Uno** (daily 8am–6pm; RD$100), as it's often called. This is a tougher proposition as it involves a 15min descent down a steep path into a ravine and therefore a longer, tougher climb back out. It's an impressive sight as the water drops 75m from a hidden lake above and thunders into a huge pool at its base. The spray creates delightful rainbow patterns on the rocky walls and it's easy to see why this was chosen as a setting for a scene in *Jurassic Park*. It's certainly worth the effort of getting here and you'll probably have the place to yourself. Head out on the Constanza road for 7km until you reach a small pueblo; there's a large sign on the left indicating the waterfall.

The final local waterfall is west of Jarabacoa on the **road to Manabao**, which terminates at La Ciénega, the most popular setting-off point for Pico Duarte treks (see p.235). Two kilometres west of town you'll see a marked turnoff for **El Mogote** – best of the local day-hikes – a high mountain with a trail that can be done in five hours round-trip; make sure to bring food and plenty of water, as the last stretch is extremely steep. At its base **Centro Salesiano**, a Salesian monastery where many of the Spanish monks have taken a vow of silence – though the

Jarabacoa outdoor activities

Río Yaque del Norte, a beautifully blue, fast-flowing mountain stream that rises up in the very heart of the Cordillera Central mountain range, plays host to a number of different whitewater adventures. The lower sections are used by several **rafting** operators and offer some exciting drops up to grade IV. The nearby Jimenoa and Yásica rivers offer even more severe challenges, but these are only accessible to experienced kayakers; note that none of the whitewater rafting trips are available to children under 12. Many of Jarabacoa's rivers and waterfalls can also be enjoyed firsthand by taking a **canyoning** trip with one of the local tour operators. Accompanied by an experienced guide, you'll make your way downstream using a combination of swimming, jumping, walking and rappelling. Previous experience isn't necessary and it's a breathtaking way to see some unspoiled countryside. Other local outdoor options include **hiking**, **biking** and **horseriding**.

Local tour operators

Iguana Mama ⓣ571-0908, ⓦwww.iguanamama.com. Although based in Cabarete, Iguana Mama offers many excursions in the Cordillera Central, including multi-day mountain-bike odysseys across the range, white water rafting (US$59) and three-day hikes of Pico Duarte (US$520). The best but priciest of all the island's adventure specialists with impeccable ethics.

Rancho Baiguate Road to Constanza Km 5 ⓣ574-6890, ⓦwww.ranchobaiguate.com.do. One of the island's biggest and best-organized tour operators, with most of their clients from the all-inclusives on the north coast. They run a wide range of adventure tours, including whitewater rafting (US$50) – with fifty percent discount for guests – and canyoning (US$50). Other excursions include hiking, mountain biking andhorseriding. Longer trips include a guided three- or four-day hike to Pico Duarte (US$255–325) and a five-day hike, which takes in the peak and Valle del Tétero (US$415).

Rancho Jarabacoa Road to Sabaneta Km 2 ⓣ222-3202. Less-expensive option than Baiguate forhorseriding in pueblo Sabaneta, 2km north of Jarabacoa.

administrator is happy to talk to visitors – supports itself by running a pasta factory and dairy. There's also a Cistercian monastery a few metres up the trail. It's another 5km further along the main road to **Vista del Yaque**, small rapids and a pool that's ideal for swimming, with a shaded outdoor bar looking out over the mountains. From here, a 1km trail leads south to the waterfall **Salto La Guázaras**, a 62m cascade that gets few visitors. Back on the highway, it's just 1km to **La Cortina**, yet another *balneario* – this one set on the edge of a cliff, with a cemented swimming pool and a bar. It's also the setting-off point for a four-hour hiking trail called **Los Dajaos**, which ploughs south through the mountains towards Constanza before looping back to the highway and the tiny pueblo of Manabao.

Eating

Long before Jarabacoa became a centre for adventure sports, it was the favoured summer retreat of Santo Domingo and Santiago's upper classes. Though most foreign visitors arrive by the busload on day-trips from their beach hotel, those staying the night will find several **restaurants** to choose from, mostly catering to these Dominican weekenders. Look out also for the super-cheap local snack foods sold from carts around the Parque Central.

Aroma de la Montaña Jamaca de Dios, 2km south. Fine dining at this exclusive residential complex high in the mountains above Jarabacoa is worth it for the views alone. Though there's the odd nod to Dominican cuisine – goat in port, for example – the influence is more New York with plenty of beef and chicken dishes and even ribs on a Saturday. Leave room for the exquisite desserts: cranberry nut caramel tart or chocolate peanut butter fudge.

D' Lo Ultimo Duarte and Independencia. A simple but cheery place serving tasty Dominican snacks, including *pastelitos*, a sort of fried pastry turnover stuffed with a variety of fillings (spiced meats, vegetables, cheese), as well as a few American offerings (burgers, inevitably).

D' Parque Galeria Pizzeria Duarte at Parque Central. Inexpensive and fun, outdoor pizza joint that's especially popular with families. The pizzas are excellent, though sometimes topped with odd combos like jalapeño peppers and sweetcorn.

Gilberto Pica Pollo Mario N. Galán. Hugely popular fast-food joint famed for its *chicharrón de pollo*. Closed Wed.

Panadería La Fleca Independencia. Right next to the La Vega guagua station, this bakery-cum-café is a sensory treat, serving fantastic sweet and savoury breads and pastries and a small selection of hot dishes for around RD$200. Free wi-fi.

Pizza y Pepperoni Paseo de los Maestros. Simple *rancho* restaurant dishing up reasonable pizzas in three sizes to eat in or take away. Popular with families, the place possesses a play area and three flat-screen TVs.

El Rancho Main crossroads at town entrance ☎574-4557. Another part of the Baiguate empire, this excellent high-end restaurant serves pizza plus specialities like baked chicken stuffed with banana, garlic soup, crepes, seafood and steaks. Nice ambience, too – the walls are adorned with art by top Dominican painters.

Drinking and nightlife

You'd be mad to miss the **nightly baseball games** during the season at the field on Calle La Confluencia, just west of the crossroads. In addition to the spirited play on the field, there's a bar in the dugout and the outfield abuts an outdoor pool hall – all in all, a great way to spend an evening relaxing and getting to know some locals. There are plenty of bars in town, with a particularly large congregation lining the Parque Central and the main crossroads, both of which turn into serious party zones at weekends. The *Venue Bar Y Lounge* is the current choice for the smartly dressed, with *Entre Amigos* above Supermercado El Cofre the more established dance venue. Next door, on the corner, the Esquina Liquor Store draws quite a crowd, which spills out onto the street and is serenaded by a seriously loud sound system, from around 6pm.

Parques Nacionales Bermúdez y Ramírez

Two national parks protect much of the mountains, cloudforests and pines present in the Cordillera Central, **BERMÚDEZ** and **RAMÍREZ**, each encompassing over seven hundred square kilometres that really need to be explored on an organized trek up **Pico Duarte**, the highest mountain in the Caribbean. At the very least, you'll need to check in with a ranger and be accompanied by a guide for whatever trip you take into the parks.

Once in, you'll see no small array of **flora**, though the endemic Creole pine tends to proliferate. Reforested Caribbean pines have been planted in places where there was once agriculture, and scattered palm trees dot the fringes. You'll also spot many orchids and bromeliads, along with Spanish moss and parasites known as The Count of Pines, their branches winding up the trunks of other trees and slowly strangulating them. There aren't many large **animals** in the mountains – persistent rumours of wild pigs aside – but you'll notice a number of lizards and even Coquí frogs near the summit of Duarte; the relatively rare tarantula or non-poisonous snake is also known to make an occasional appearance. There are plenty of birds, too, especially Hispaniolan parrots, hummingbirds and woodpeckers; you'll hear a raucous population of white-tailed crows near the summit.

Signs of **agriculture** are visible in the small valleys along the southern half of Ramírez, though the traditional slash-and-burn farming has been banned. Local folklore has it that small bands of Tainos are still holed up in the deepest mountains waiting for the Spaniards to depart, and that the trails are haunted by **ciguapas** – mythical blue-skinned women with their feet back-to-front who seduce young men at night and lure them to their deaths at the bottoms of streams.

Trekking practicalities

You can trek up the mountain any time of year, but most people choose to ascend **between November and March**, when there's less chance of heavy rain. Regardless, you should never attempt the hike without a long waterproof coat with a hood, winter clothing (at night the temperature can reach freezing), a sleeping bag and good hiking boots. Whichever of the trails you choose, you are required to register in the park office at the head of the trail. If not part of an organized tour (see p.232), you'll need to pay the RD$200 **park entrance** as well as hiring at least one **guide** for every five people (RD$600/day plus meals). It's also a good idea to rent at least one **mule** (RD$400/day); the chances are that the guide will insist on it, to carry water and food as well as to get you down safely if things go wrong. You'll also need to purchase enough food for yourself and the guide, plus an extra day and a half in case of emergency. Stock up on water as well, and bring purification tablets or a filter for any river water you might drink. There are several very basic **cabins** with wood-burning stoves in which to sleep along the routes, but a couple of the treks will require tent camping for one night (it may be possible to rent these locally but it's best to bring your own or talk to one of the local tour operators listed on p.232). On any of the five trails listed, you'll spend the night before or after your Duarte ascent at the nearby La Compartición cabins.

Pico Duarte

Five strenuous treks lead up to 3087m **Pico Duarte**, which towers over the centre of the mountain range alongside its sibling peak La Pelona ("Baldy"; before 1930 they were known as Pelona Grande and Pelona Chica). The lack of fresh water on the mountain has left it uninhabited through the centuries – though Tainos once lived in the nearby Valle del Tétero – and the first recorded ascent was only in 1944.

Climbing to the very top of the Caribbean's highest mountain holds definite cachet, and the view from the treeless peak is magnificent (though even here you can't quite escape from it all – Duarte's face is sculpted onto one of the rocks). If you've come this far, think seriously about extending your trek to include **Valle del Tétero** – a broad savannah with roaring mountain rivers, wild horses and Taino petroglyphs. This can be done by adding a two-day loop into the La Ciénega trek or by following one of the trails that crosses the valley on the approach to the peak. Unless you're a seasoned trekker, you'll do well to stick to the La Ciénega route.

La Ciénega trail

The most popular trip up the mountain starts from the tiny pueblo of La Ciénega, 25km southwest of Jarabacoa, where you'll need to register for the 46km round-trip at the office by the park's entrance on the far side of the village. It's advisable to arrive in the afternoon, sort out the formalities and then camp down in the village with a view to starting out early the next morning. The first leg is little more than a comfortable 4km riverside stroll to a bridge across the river at **Los Tablones**. Once over the river, however, the climbing starts in earnest and you'll gain over 2000m in the next 14km, mostly on a badly eroded track that wends its way through some wonderfully wild woodland. Regular stops at official picnic sites allow you to get your breath back and to peep out through the canopy for a glimpse of the totally pristine wilderness that surrounds you.

You'll spend the night in a ramshackle cabin at **La Compartición** and then scramble up the last 5km at around 4.30am to be on the bare rocky summit for sunrise. It's quite a stirring sight to watch the sun creep over the horizon, casting a bright-red hue on the banks of cloud beneath your feet. You'll then backtrack to collect your belongings at the cabin and start the long descent back down to the village.

Mata Grande trail

Allow five days for this 90km round-trip trek with elevation going from 850m to 3087m. To get there from San José de las Matas go 5km east on the road to Santiago, take the marked turnoff at the town of Pedegral and head 15km south to the park station at pueblo **Mata Grande**, where you can register and hire a guide and mules. The first day of the trip is 20km past abandoned farming towns and sweeping views of Santiago and the Vega Real to the cabin at **Río La Guácara**. A good spot to stop and unpack lunch is 8km south of Mata Grande at the Arroyo Las Lagunas cabin, where you should also load up on water. The second day follows the cloud forest of the Río Bao 12km to the gorgeous **Valle del Bao**, a stunning, elevated plain bereft of trees with high grass and wild horses, a large cabin and a view of La Pelona. On the third day, 10km in total, you'll ascend La Pelona, then join up with the Sabaneta trail to hit the top of Pico Duarte.

Sabaneta trail

This trail was supposedly blazed by local messiah **Liborio**, who ducked the American Marines for several years in these mountains (see p.257). You'll need six days to do this 96km round-trip journey, spanning from 600m to 3087m in elevation. This trek is much harder than La Ciénega and Mata Grande, and you'll encounter few fellow travellers along the way. To get there from San Juan de la Maguana, take the paved road north from the city's Rotunda Anacaona for 20km to the enormous dam, **Presa Sabaneta**. A few hundred metres in front of the dam you'll find a car park and the park station, where you can secure a guide and mules, and camp for the night before setting off.

The first day is not particularly long but quite steep, 12km to the cabin at **Alto de la Rosa**, a 1600m peak. Along the way you'll pass abandoned banana plantations and farms, many of which were blasted hard by Hurricane Georges. The second day is a slow 22km slog through dense vegetation to the **Macutico** cabin in the 2200m high Río Blanco valley, where you can stock up on water. The third day is the toughest, climbing Pico Barraco before joining up with the Mata Grande trail at the top of La Pelona and continuing on to Pico Duarte.

Las Lagunas trail

Another strenuous six-day trek, this round trip of 108km is even more difficult than the Sabaneta trail. To get there from San Juan de la Maguana, take the Carretera Sánchez east and make a left at the signposted Cruce de las Yayas, 9km north to Padre Las Casas. At the town's main crossroads take a left and 100m further on you'll find the **Las Lagunas** park station, where you can hire a guide and mules. They don't get much traffic on this route, so you may have to offer the park officer a few hundred extra pesos to get permission to use the trail. The first day goes through palm and deciduous forest dotted with lagoons and small subsistence farms. Convenient markers along the way are riverside El Limón at 3km on; pastel El Botoncillo 2km further; Las Cañitas (a military outpost with camping and a hilltop panorama) 2km beyond that; and **El Tétero** – a traditional cattle-raising *campo* where you should camp for the night – 3km further still.

The second day takes you 4km north past numerous farming shacks before joining up with the Constanza trail at Sabana Andrés; from here it's another 4km of small farming *campos* and 6km of dense, unpopulated pine forest to the top of 2100m Alto del Valle, then 4km almost straight down to 1500m-high **Valle del Tétero**. The peaceful valley holds a pine forest adorned with thick cobwebs of Spanish moss, a large cabin, dozens of wild horses, two freezing-cold rivers and – at its eastern end – a number of Taino petroglyphs that archeologists believe denoted an island-wide peace treaty between *caciques*; ask at the park station for directions to these ancient markings. From here it's 5km to El Cruce and up the La Ciénega road to Pico Duarte.

Los Corralitos trail

At 86km and six days round trip, it's not the longest but is easily the steepest and toughest of the Pico Duarte trails, and for this reason rarely used. From Constanza take a taxi 8km west to **Los Corralitos**, where you can acquire a guide and mules. If you'd like, you can drive another 8km to the cabin at Los Cayetanos, which will cut three hours off your travel time. From here it's three more hours past sadly deforested mountainside to the confluence of the rivers Grande and Yaquesillo – the border of Parque Nacional Ramírez – and another 7km through a small valley and over several hills to the **Los Rodríguez** cabin, where two park employees are stationed. The second day is sixteen extremely steep kilometres to the **Valle del Tétero** (see opposite). Four kilometres along the way, the path intersects with the Las Lagunas trail at Sabana Andres; you'll reach the valley and its park cabin 14km further on. The third day goes 5km to El Cruce and then up to Pico Duarte.

Bonao

BONAO's economy is supported single-handedly by the nearby ferronickel mine, an imposing industrial complex 1km south of town and once the second largest such mine in the world. Like most mining towns, it's pretty depressing – bleak, concrete and crowded with thousands of zigzagging, dustcloud-raising motorcycles – and holds nothing of particular interest, aside from a few pretty mock-gingerbread houses in Barrio Gringo at its northern end. Now that the **Carnival** at La Vega has become so touristy, though, an increasing number of people come here in February for a more authentic, equally wild celebration. If you want to see a real, traditional Carnival celebrated mostly by locals, come here first.

At other times, you can simply enjoy the piñon-covered mountains that border Bonao, which are best experienced by taking a scenic road southwest to the **Boca de Blanco** reservoir and dam a couple of hours outside town. A few kilometres on, turn east at the riverside village **Los Quemados** – which has a couple of places to stop for lunch – and you'll find yourself amid some terrific mountain scenery, including views of two separate waterfalls. The reservoir itself, 15km further on the main road, is a perfect place for an afternoon picnic and a swim, and you're allowed to walk atop the dam.

Practicalities

Few travellers choose Bonao for an **overnight stay**. If circumstances dictate, you'll find one decent hotel in town, the *Aquarius*, Duarte 104 (Ⓣ296-2898; ⑤), which boasts 24-hour room service, telephone, satellite TV, in-room internet access and the most popular disco in the city. If you're just looking for a decent, inexpensive plate of chicken, beans and rice, consider **eating** in Plaza Maurifel on Calle F.J. Peynado. Budget travellers should avoid the terrible cheap hotels in the centre and instead head 2km west of town along the Boca de Blanco road to *Rancho Wendy* (Ⓣ630-1261, Ⓦwww.ranchowendy.com), just outside the village of Los Quemados by a stream. The no-frills rooms (from US$15 per room) and dorm beds (US$9 per person) here are clean and comfortable though hot water is lacking; **camping** (US$5 per tent) is also possible and sleeping bags can be hired. Inexpensive meals (US$3–5) are provided or you can use a shared kitchen. The ranch offers a range of good-value excursions into the surrounding mountains,

Piñon trees

The **piñon trees** that line the winding rural roads just west of Bonao – as well as many other roads across the country – are thought by many to have magical properties; local *brujos* use their wood for staffs with which to heal the sick. This belief stems in part from a strange physical characteristic: around the time of Good Friday the piñon leaves and bark turn red, which locals claim is in emulation of the Crucifixion. The trees do have some remarkable **regenerative properties**, too; stick one of the branches in the ground and allow it to take root – within a year the branch becomes another full-grown tree.

either on foot or on horseback (US$24–46), taking in lovely waterfalls, Taino petroglyphs and even panning for gold.

Constanza

CONSTANZA is a drop-dead gorgeous, circular valley set deep in the mountains at an altitude of 1300m. Populated and farmed since the Taino era, it was created millennia ago by a crashing meteor; as you first pass over the lip of the crater you'll be stunned by the fertile, flat valley – irrigated by thousands of sprinklers and hemmed in on all sides by jagged peaks. Constanza had virtually no contact with the outside world until the end of the nineteenth century, when a decent dirt road was finally blazed to it; later development occurred when Trujillo trucked in 200 Japanese families in the 1950s, to introduce their farming methods to the valley. All manner of non-tropical crops are grown on the farms today – strawberries, raspberries, apples, garlic and roses; less tantalizing is the military base in town, a permanent presence since Castro attempted a Communist takeover here in 1959.

Arrival and information

Guaguas drop off and pick up at their stop at the entrance to the town proper on Calle Luperón, just before the Banco Popular. Those to Constanza from Jarabacoa or the Autopista Duarte, which are generally twin-cab pick-up trucks have two price tariffs: RD$150 for riding inside the cabin – assuming there's room – and RD$80 for toughing it out in the back. Transport from Jarabacoa, departing across from the Esso station, runs six times a day approximately every 90min though the timetable is fluid. The former hazardous dirt road is now being paved at some speed and should be passable in an ordinary saloon car by the time of publication. Guaguas from the Autopista Duarte (7am–8pm) take around 70min up the smooth yet twisting paved road that begins 6km north of Bonao and affords spectacular views across the Cibao valley. This is also the easiest approach **by car**. The town's small airstrip, **Aeropuerto 14 de Junio**, is scarcely used.

The helpful **tourist office**, Duarte 17, can provide you with a useful **map** of the town and surroundings and direct you to a hotel if necessary, but for information on tours and hikes, you're best off contacting **Cluster Ecoturístico Constanza** (Ⓣ539-1022, Ⓦwww.constanza.com.do; daily 9am–1pm & 2–6pm) situated by the airport on the road into town. They run a range of excursions, from mountain hikes to local sightseeing and agricultural visits to fruit farms and nurseries for small groups from around RD$2000 per group.

Most essentials are located on the main drag, Calle Luperón, within the first few blocks. These include several **banks** with 24 hour **ATMs**, a **phone centre** and **internet** access (RD$30/hr), tucked inside Plaza Dorada, a tiny shop entrance (and not actually a mall as the name suggests) just after the Isleta petrol station. The best **pharmacy**, Farmacia San José, is located on the park.

Be sure to bring plenty of **warm clothing**. Constanza can get very cold all year round, particularly at night in winter when frost on the ground is not uncommon. It's one of the few Dominican towns where you'll regularly see the residents wrapped up in thick coats and woollen scarves and hats.

Accommodation

There's a modest selection of accommodation comprising a handful of small budget hotels within the town, which all provide hot water, and a couple of much more spacious and holiday-oriented establishments up on the hillside 2km east of town, which draws many families from Santo Domingo at weekends.

Altocerro 2km east of town centre ⓣ530-6192, ⓦwww.altocerro.com. All city comforts and sophistication in an idyllic mountain setting; guests can choose from serried ranks of full equipped villas (1–3 bedrooms, accommodating up to 7), hotel rooms and suites, or even camping, in a lovely wooded area at the back, with BBQs and campfire pits. The villas – which come with fireplaces for those chilly nights – and all hotel rooms have balconies affording fabulous mountain views while the main block has a good restaurant and mini-mart. Breakfast is included in the rates, which are cheaper midweek. Quad rental and horse-riding can also be arranged. ⑤

Hotel Dilania Gastón Fernando Deligne 7 ⓣ531-2213. Half a block up behind the Banco Popular so pleasantly quiet, the hotel comprises a dozen spotless but spartan en-suite rooms (hot water and cable TV) with comfy beds and the odd idiosyncratic fitment, and is set round a small garden. The on-site restaurant serves good food but you shouldn't be in a hurry; don't miss the home-made strawberry juice. ③

Hotel Valle Nuevo Gratereaux at Antonio Cabral ⓣ539-1114, ⓦwww.hotelvallenuevo.com. Ignoring the tacky furnishings – murals above the bed, frilly toilet covers and faux curtain tassles – this place offers the best value in town. Rooms are comfortable, with fridges, and a couple of communal balconies offer fine mountain views. ③

Mi Casa Sánchez at Luperón ⓣ539-2764. Central location with simple, clean rooms (cable TV and hot water), though a little dark, and decent beds. RD$200 extra for breakfast. ③

Rancho Constanza 2km east of town centre ⓣ682-2410, ⓦwww.ranchoconstanza.tripod.com. More rustic and rough-and-ready than *Altocerro,* this hillside resort consists of spacious, though dark, self-catering villas or hotel rooms and suites, which additionally offer free wi-fi. Breakfast is included though meals plans are also possible. ⑤

The town and around

The town itself, taking up the western quarter of the valley, is mostly residential and fairly compact. The hub of activity is the **farmers' market** just north of Calle Luperón – the main thoroughfare – where truckloads of goods are loaded up and shipped to Santiago, Santo Domingo and beyond. At the south end of town sits the decaying **Nueva Suiza**, an abandoned Trujillo manor that was used for a time as a resort spa but is now fenced off and boarded up. If you stay the night in Constanza, it's worth heading out to the eastern lip of the valley crater on a clear day, to check out the unbelievable **sunset**.

The **fiestas patronales** are in late September but there are periodically major cycling and motocross competitions that enliven proceedings.

A decent dirt road leads 12km south of town to the area's major sight, **Aguas Blancas**, a torrential, 150m waterfall in three sections with a large pool at the base.

Hiking in Constanza

As you'd expect amongst such dazzling scenery, the Constanza valley boasts several of the DR's finest **hiking trails**. One 3hr trip sets off from *Rancho Constanza* in Colonia Kennedy, which is just east of the main town. From the hotel, take the dirt road north until you reach a white house at the top of the hill, the starting point of a trail that leads into the thick of the alpine forest. You can also set off 5km east of Constanza, via the Carretera Constanza, to the adjoining valley of **Tireo Arriba**, which holds a smaller farming pueblo worth exploring for a look at the local way of life. If you have your own transport, keep going 8km further east to pueblo **La Parma** – just before you reach the road to Jarabacoa – for a hike along the **Río Arroyazo**. Ask locals to direct you to the riverside walking path, from which it's a 45min hike to an unspoiled wilderness *balneario*, with small cascades along the river giving way to a large pool partially enclosed by boulders.

The scenery alone is worth the somewhat difficult trek out – towering 2000m mountains veined with cavernous valley ribbons, half of it virgin pine forest and half terraced agriculture. Farms teeter on mountaintops so inaccessible you'll wonder how the building materials ever got there; look also for the many cattle that graze precariously along zigzagging paths worn into the steep mountainside. You should be able to procure a *motoconcho* ride there for around RD$250–300, including wait time.

The village of El Convento, just before Aguas Blancas, has started a community-based tourism project (Cascada Tours) offering excursions to the falls from Constanza, which include transport, a guided walk along a newly cut track and lunch at *La Perla de Aguas Blancas* (see below). Tickets are available from the tourist office and the Cluster Ecoturístico Constanza for US$40 per person (see p.238), less if you get there under your own steam. You can also pick up a guide by enquiring at *La Perla*. Alternatively, you can walk yourself along the path, which is signposted off the main road, a couple of kilometres beyond the restaurant.

Sixteen kilometres north of Constanza, in the lofty Valle de la Culata just inside the boundary of the Parque Nacional Bermúdez, lie some impressive Taino petroglyphs, **Las Piedras Letreadas**, which are well worth seeking out though you'll need a 4WD to reach there.

Eating, drinking and nightlife

Wherever you **eat** in Constanza, you're likely to get a good sampling of the local produce, often plucked from the fields the same day. *Neblinas Café*, on the corner of Duarte and Ureña, is a friendly little town **bar** that nets good live music and serves two dozen international beers and a host of mixed drinks. The current popular dance spots are *Moe Café Bar*, on Ureña and Duarte, and *Kapioka Bar,* opposite the airport, which both play *música varieda*.

Altocerro 2km east of town centre ☎ 530-6192, ⓦ www.altocerro.com. Expect tourist prices here but the view alone from the first-floor terrace restaurant makes a visit worthwhile. That said, the food is satisfying too, particularly the meat accompanied by locally produced veg. Mains generally RD$380–900.

Comedor Luisa Antonio Mario García at Matilde Viñas ☎ 574-2100. Next to the baseball pitch, this cosy informal restaurant is the best place for authentic, tasty Dominican food, though sadly it's only open for lunch.

Lorenzo's Luperón 83. Hardly a buzzing atmosphere, and the elevator music can grate but the menu is extensive – sweet and sour pork fillet, guinea fowl and rabbit, plus the usual pastas and pizzas – and the food is generally good. Most mains are RD$190–350.

Mi Casa Sánchez at Luperón. Tops for consistency when dining in town, offering a range of Dominican specialities (most main RD$190–310), such as goat, rabbit and guinea fowl as well as the ubiquitous chicken, fish and pasta dishes.

La Perla de Aguas Blancas at the village of El Convento ☎ 991-5530. Within striking distance of the falls, this charming, rustic bar complete with Japanese restaurant is set in wooded surroundings populated by parrots. A great place to reward yourself with some *comida típica* after a walk to the falls, or to just chill with a beer. A major feast is on offer the last Sunday of the month. Also offers camping space. Mon–Wed from 11am, Thurs–Sun from 9am.

South of Constanza: Reserva Científica Valle Nuevo

The gutted, sky-high road that leads south from Constanza to San José de Ocóa – considered by Dominicans as the worst of the country's many poor roads – offers an adventure, however hazardous, that you're not likely to forget soon. Do not attempt this unless you have an excellent 4WD and are an experienced mountain driver. Allow five hours and be sure to bring two spare tyres, winter clothing and emergency supplies. The road runs through a national forest reserve known as **Reserva Científica Valle Nuevo**, a steep alpine wilderness with views that extend across a large chunk of the Cordillera Central, and for much of the trip you'll be skirting the edge of a cliff far above the clouds; the park entrance is 4km south of Aguas Blancas. If you have time, make a stop at the turnoff for the small military fort at **Alta Bandera**, 30km south of Constanza, where you can get a glimpse of a concrete **pyramid**, La Pirámide, built in 1957 by Trujillo to mark the exact centre of the island. There are now basic **camping** facilities here.

Valle Nuevo also offers a terrific opportunity to relax in luxury amid remote mountain wilderness at ★ *Villa Pajón* (ⓣ412-5210, ⓦwww.villapajon.do; ⑤), a set of lovely cabins built on the site of an old saw mill 4km south of the national park entrance (9km south of Aguas Blancas). Each cabin has its own fireplace, kitchen, bath, outdoor barbecue and multiple bedrooms. There is only electricity (solar-powered) in one of the larger cabins but kerosene lamps are provided. Given the remoteness, you should bring your own food with you – though you can arrange in advance to have someone cook and perform housekeeping. Outdoor activities abound, including unbelievable hiking andhorseriding into the surrounding mountains.

The Vega Real

East of Santiago, the **VEGA REAL**, an unbroken expanse of farmland bounded by a triangle of Cibao farming towns, is responsible for a phenomenal amount of produce and tobacco, but it's not exactly high on any travel itinerary, lacking any really compelling sights or activities. If you feel like getting lost for a few days, though, you'll likely find its towns more pleasant than those on the over-industrialized Autopista Duarte. **Moca** is an easy enough day-trip from Santiago, but **San Francisco de Macorís** requires a bit more effort; from the latter you can make the splendid mountain hike into the Cordillera Septentrional at **Quita Espuela**. **Cotuí**, though, features the best scenery, flanked by rice paddies, river-veined savannahs, and the Cordillera Oriental; just outside town you'll find the Presa Hatillo dam's artificial lake, arguably the prettiest spot in the valley.

Moca

MOCA, a sizeable farming depot 16km east of Santiago, is set amid some of the most fertile land in the valley. It's better known, though, for two episodes from Dominican history – as the birthplace of the 1842 **Moca Constitution**, which set democratic standards for government that have rarely been adhered to, and as the site of nineteenth-century despot Ulises Heureaux's assassination. There's nothing here to commemorate the former, but the latter event is celebrated in downtown Moca at a small park on Calle Vasquez, where you'll find the **Monument to the Tyrant Killers**, a small Deco sculpture honouring assassins José Contreras and José Inocencio, erected right on the spot where Heureaux was shot. Across the street from the park, above Espinal Car Wash, a **miniature locomotive** has been placed to honour the old railroad that brought initial prosperity to Moca, while the rest of downtown is crowded with storefront businesses, warehouses and restaurants.

Nicer than anything in the workaday downtown district, the nineteenth-century **Iglesia de Corazón de Jesús**, corner of Sánchez and Corazón de Jesús, sports a neo-Plateresque facade and a prominent clock tower. The spacious interior floods with light and boasts an impressive pipe organ. From the church you can also drive northwest down Avenida Duarte to the local cigar factory (see p.228).

Practicalities

Frequent **guagas** run between Moca and Santiago or La Vega. The **hotels** here cater to passing business people and are centred around busy Avenida Duarte, Moca's main road. The best hotel in town is *Oasis*, Cordova 121 (☎578-5594; ③), which has 22 comfortable rooms featuring a/c, TV and telephones; budget options are gathered around Avenida Duarte.

El Ranchero, a high-end **restaurant** just off the Parque Central, serves heaped portions of charcoal-grilled seafood, steak and chicken on wooden trays; the kitchen is behind a glass wall, so you can watch the chefs cook your meal. *D'Gala*, De la Maza 7, is another excellent local restaurant that features seafood, steaks and *criolla* dishes; attached is a large **dancefloor** popular on weekends. For cheaper food head to *Paco Pizza*, Independencia and Alfonseco, which serves pizza and *pollo al carbón* on a lively outdoor patio. By far the most majestically set restaurant in the area, though, is *Mirador La Cumbre*, 9km north of town on Highway 21 (the road to Sabaneta de Yásica), which has great panoramic views in addition to top-notch food, including filet mignon, crepes and Creole shrimp.

Salcedo

A tiny town midway between Moca and San Francisco, **SALCEDO** is the hometown of the **Mirabal sisters**, martyred victims of Trujillo. The house they grew up in, the **Museo Hermanas Mirabal**, 4km east of Salcedo's centre (daily 8am–5pm; ☎577-2704; RD$200), was the setting for much of Julia Álvarez's best-selling novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, but its tacky period furnishings and cordoned-off bath towels stencilled with the sisters' names will only engage aficionados of Mirabal lore.

Back in town, stroll around and check out the countless **murals** (of varying artistic merit), for which Salcedo is becoming renowned, such as the ballet dancers on the wall of the sports hall. Just north of the **Parque Central**, you'll find the baseball complex of the **Kansas City Royals**, worth a visit during the summer when daily games are scheduled. Also held in the summer is the **Feria Artesanal**, during the first week of August, when hundreds of people from surrounding *campos* sell local handicrafts, including pottery, intricately woven straw bags and wooden religious icons; look also for the *gajumba* in the centre of the Parque Central – a musical instrument created by bending a tree over until its top almost touches the ground, tying it with a string of catgut and playing this string with a bow. The exact date of the fair varies; call the Instituto Folklórico Dominicano in Santo Domingo for more information.

Guaguas bound for Santiago, Moca or San Francisco de Macorís leave from different spots close to the park. If you want to **stay the night** in Salcedo, *La Casona* (☎577-4468; ③), a block from the park on Doroteo Tapia, provides basic clean rooms (hot water, a/c and cable TV). There are plenty of *comedores* round the park where you can grab a good cheap **meal** and *Orlando Car Wash*, 1km out on the road to San Francisco de Macorís, serves reasonable food and is the place to party, sometimes with live music.

San Francisco de Macorís

The farming city of **SAN FRANCISCO DE MACORÍS**, with a 200,000-strong population in the heart of the Vega Real, owes its prosperity to the **cocoa industry** – the business behind what few major sights there are in town. Chocolate is not the only money-making product here; in recent years, San Francisco has served as a laundering point for **cocaine** profits, a far cry from its slightly more benign tobacco-producing days in the nineteenth century. The compact downtown holds most of the major office buildings, restaurants and discos – the latter of which supply San Francisco with some of the DR's best nightlife.

The large **Mercado Modelo**, in the city centre on Sánchez and Castillo, is worth checking out, an enormous produce and cocoa depot where peasants from the surrounding countryside come with pack animals to sell their goods during the day. There's not much else in the way of entertainment though you should check out a **baseball game** in the winter at the stadium just east of town on Highway 122, Estadio Julián Javier (ⓣ566-4882, ⓦwww.gigantesdelcibao.com).

Loma Quita Espuela

More diverting than these scant city sights is a day-trip up to the **Reserva Científica Loma Quita Espuela**, a virgin rainforest reserve set on the side of a high Cordillera Septentrional mountain, 15km north of town on Calle Castillo. It is managed by a local NGO (ⓣ588-4156, ⓦwww.flqe.org.do) that also offers a guided hike (in Spanish) up Quita Espuela, explaining about the flora and fauna; what's more the views over the Cibao from the observation tower on the summit are stunning (RD$50 entrance and RD$1050 for groups of up to five). A shorter, less demanding trek through coffee and cocoa farms, ending in a swimming hole is also available. Longer expeditions of two days or more can be arranged on request.

Practicalities

Caribe Tours (ⓣ588-2221), which offers over a dozen daily services to and from Santo Domingo, drops off and picks up east of the town centre, from where you can catch a quick guagua into town. San Francisco has an efficient system of RD$10 city **guaguas**, and RD$100 private **taxis** are plentiful as well. Guaguas also run to Nagua and La Vega from Avenida Libertad and Duarte.

Despite its rather large size and population, San Francisco doesn't offer too much in the way of either **hotels** or **restaurants**. If you need to stay, *Hotel Libano* overlooking the main park at Restauración (ⓣ588-2419; ④) is a decent mid-range choice. All the rooms have a/c, cable TV and hot water. Vegetarians will be pleasantly surprised to find a decent vegan cafeteria within town, *Ananda* on Calle Castillo at Santa Rosa, two blocks from the park; a great juice bar, *Cafetería Para Picar*, and source of crispy empanadas lies on the same road a block back towards the park. The most popular spot is Plaza Caliente, a food court on 27 de Febrero, where the "oriental" counter serves the freshest food. More formal dining can be enjoyed at *Restaurante Dorado*, on El Carmen and Restauración, which serves decent Chinese and international dishes.

Nightlife is vibrant in San Francisco as the town's **discos** get more than their fair share of big-name **merengue** and **bachata** acts; hand-painted advertisements posted throughout the city will keep you up to date on who's playing and where.

Cotuí

Tucked away in the farthest southeastern reaches of the Vega Real, **COTUÍ** is the archetypal cow town – friendly and laid back, full of rice-processing factories and produce-laden trucks. The few visitors who make it here come for the beautiful surrounding countryside, especially **Presa Hatillo**, the largest dam in the Caribbean, and its peaceful reservoir that sits amid layers of rolling hills. There are also a couple of impressive Taino caves nearby that are definitely worth a special trip. To get to the dam, take Calle Sánchez 3km from the Parque Central to the police station, turn left and continue for a further 9km. There's a hiking trail that leads along the edge of the lake, or you can go instead to **Cotuí Piscina** (daily 9.30am–5.30pm; RD$50), an Olympic-sized swimming pool at the entrance to the dam, fed by lake water and with a small restaurant/bar on the premises.

There are two major **Taino caves** in the area, one accessible only by water and the other by land. They're very tricky to find so you'll need to ask around for a reliable guide. If you're intent on seeing a cave on your own, the only one you can get to is **Guacara Sanabe**. From Cotuí, head west to La Mata de Cotuí and turn left at the Farmacia Candileja. Turn right at the end of the road, then left at the small rectangular water tank and left again at pueblo Hernando Alonso. This takes you to the lakeside, where you can hire one of the farmers to escort you the rest of the way by foot (about 8km round trip) for RD$500. Inside the cave (bring a torch) you'll find a plethora of stunning rock art: highlights include a variety of animals, men sliding down poles, two cave guardians at the back entrance and a couple of frightening depictions of Taino priest masks on the ceiling. The small piles of ground seashells that you'll find scattered about were used to create the hallucinogenic powders that the Taino priests inhaled during cave rituals.

Practicalities

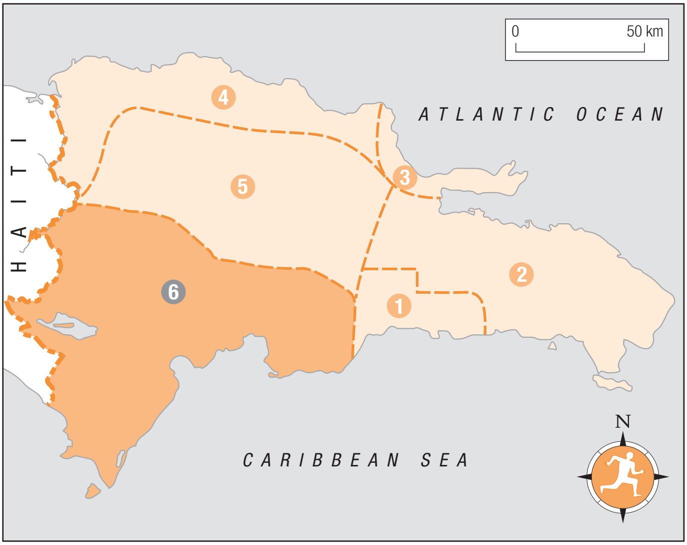
Guaguas arrive and depart from the Parque Central, around which you'll find most of the town's businesses.

More budget-oriented accommodation is available in town, though the quality is generally poor; the best of the bunch is *Santoreni*, 27 de Febrero 68 (☎585-3099; ②), which also has a good restaurant.

The best **restaurant** in the area, though, is *La Muralla*, perched atop the dam with an enviable view of the lake and specializing in fresh trout plucked from the lake the same day and prepared in a variety of ways, from steamed or skewered to deep-fried. Within town, *El Mesón* on Calle Sánchez 6, 500m east of the Parque Central, is a patio restaurant that serves the usual Dominican dishes and pizza and livens up on weekends with a rock band.

6

The southwest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CHAPTER 6

Highlights

- ✱ **El Pomier caves** A set of remote caves protected as a national park, with thousands of Taino pictographs. See p.251
- ✱ **Las Salinas** Set amid rolling sand dunes, this small fishing village holds one of the island's most beautiful beaches – wonderfully uncorrupted by mass tourism. See p.253
- ✱ **Hiking around San José** This quiet mountain town gets few visitors, but the hiking trails that fan out across the spectacular southern mountains merit a few days' exploration. See p.254
- ✱ **San Rafael and Los Patos** Two beautiful beaches with pounding surf and waterfalls that thrum down from the rainforest-draped mountains and pour into the sea. See p.263
- ✱ **Lago Enriquillo** A salt-water lake the size of Manhattan, with alligators, tens of thousands of tropical birds and Isla Cabritos, heavily populated with rhinoceros iguana. See p.267

▲ Lago Enriquillo

6

The southwest

The coast west of Santo Domingo grows more beautiful the further out you go. While you may find the cities immediately west of the capital to be sprawling and none too attractive, the majestic beauty of the mountainous coastal road between Barahona and the Haitian border is simply jawdropping. Thanks to the lack of mass tourism, you'll find the area particularly unspoiled and suitable for independent exploration. Further inland, the diverse range of landscapes and natural attractions are collectively famous for the rich birdlife they hold, from a salt-water lake set in the desert to expanses of wild, seemingly endless cloud forest.

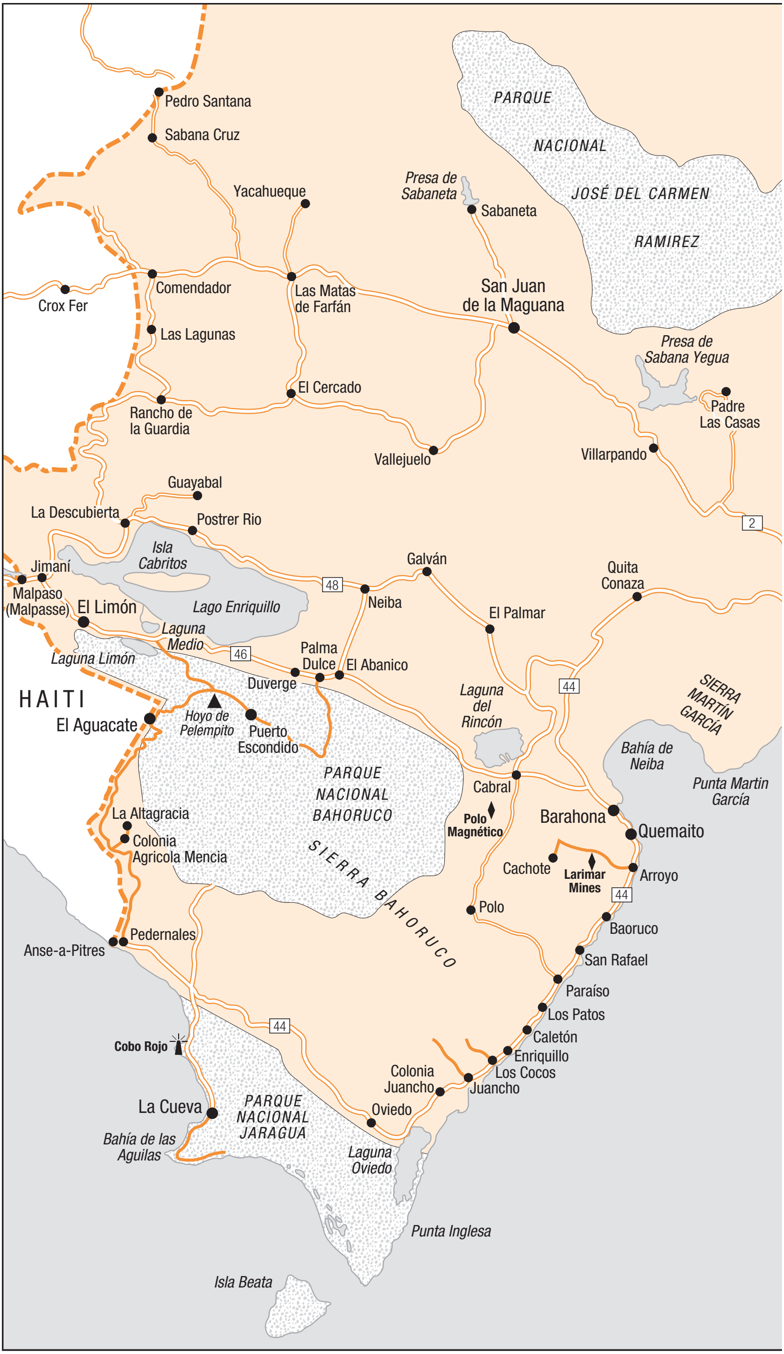
Once the focus of Trujillo's personal sugar empire, the area is now better known as one of the country's poorest regions as a result of its over-dependence on the crop, its economy collapsing when sugar prices took a nosedive back in the 1960s. It is nonetheless rich in heritage: north of San Cristóbal, the caves of **El Pomier** hold some excellent **Taino rock art**, while the town of San Juan de la Maguana, north of Azua, is famed for its **religious festivals**.

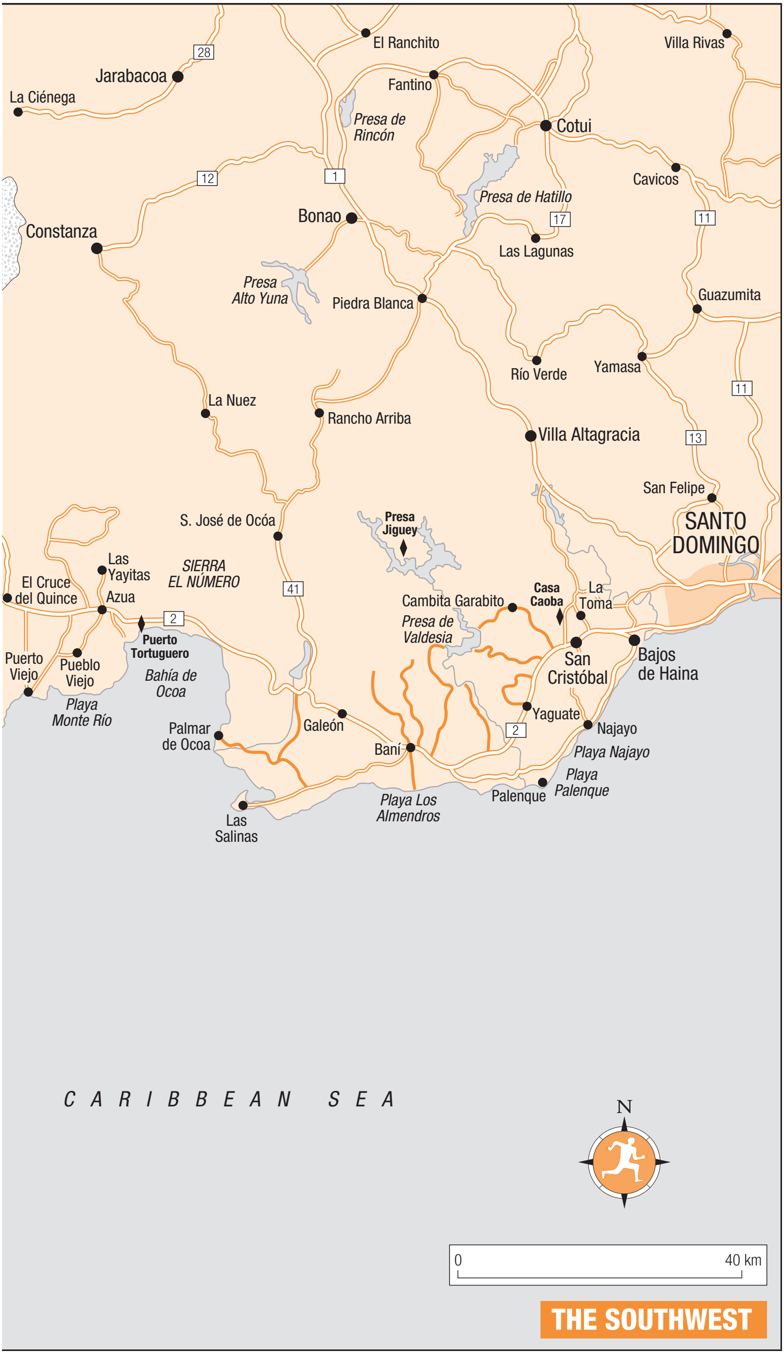
To the west of the capital, the countryside devolves into arid semi-desert, punctuated by large, industrial cities of interest only for their own nearby beaches. These cities – notably **San Cristóbal**, **Baní** and **Azua** – have tried to emulate the success of the Dominican Republic's other major sugar zone, the southeast, by courting all-inclusive hotel developers to the many **superb beaches** that run from San Cristóbal all the way to the border, but these efforts have thus far been unsuccessful.

Most travellers choose to instead head to the region's nominal centre **Barahona**, an old sugar-processing capital that has seen better days, thanks to the sporadic operations of its mill; inland from Barahona, and from the whole coast really, vast tracts of sugar cane take over.

Southwest of the Barahona along the coast, you'll find several inviting rural fishing villages between the Caribbean Sea and the southern peaks of the **Sierra Bahoruco**, the island's second largest range, covered with rainforest and boasting steep slopes that drop off abruptly at the coast. **Paraíso** – a pleasant town with a long sandy beach – is one of the prime spots along this stretch, while **San Rafael** and **Los Patos** both have rainforest waterfalls tumbling down from the mountains, forming freshwater pools before meeting the sea.

At the flint-shaped peninsula taken up by **Parque Nacional Jaragua**, in the far southwestern part of the country, the mountains retreat a bit and lush greenery evaporates into stark desert. Obscured from view on the peninsula's sharp edge lies the beautiful **Bahía de las Águilas**, 20km of protected beach wilderness with no development or human inhabitants that makes for an idyllic retreat, if a little tricky to get to. The government has made sporadic efforts to colonize this area too with tourism infrastructure, but perhaps due to its remoteness there has been little impact


Pedro Santana
Sabana Cruz
Yacahueque
Presa de Sabaneta
Sabaneta
PARQUE NACIONAL JOSÉ DEL CARMEN RAMIREZ
Comendador
Crox Fer
Las Matas de Farfán
San Juan de la Maguana
Las Lagunas
Presa de Sabana Yegua
Padre Las Casas
El Cercado
Rancho de la Guardia
Vallejuelo
Villarpando
Guayabal
2
La Descubierta
Postrer Rio
Isla Cabritos
Jimaní
Galván
Quita Conaza
48
Neiba
Malpaso (Malpasse)
El Limón
Lago Enriquillo
El Palmar
Laguna Medio
Laguna Limón
46
Palma Dulce
El Abanico
Duverge
44
HAITI
Hoyo de Pelempito
Laguna del Rincón
SIERRA MARTÍN GARCÍA
El Aguacate
Puerto Escondido
Bahía de Neiba
PARQUE NACIONAL BAHORUCO
Cabral
Punta Martin García
Polo Magnético
Barahona
Quemaito
La Altagracia
Colonia Agricola Mencia
SIERRA BAHORUCO
Cachote
Larimar Mines
Arroyo
44
Polo
Baoruco
Pedernales
Anse-a-Pitres
San Rafael
Paraíso
Los Patos
44
Caletón
Cobo Rojo
Enriquillo
Los Cocos
Colonia Juancho
Juancho
La Cueva
PARQUE NACIONAL JARAGUA
Oviedo
Bahía de las Aguilas
Laguna Oviedo
Punta Inglesa
Isla Beata



THE SOUTHWEST

El Ranchito
Villa Rivas
28
Jarabacoa
Fantino
La Ciénega
Presa de Rincón
Cotui
12
1
Cavicos
Presa de Hatillo
Bonao
17
11
Constanza
Las Lagunas
Presa Alto Yuna
Piedra Blanca
Guazumita
Río Verde
Yamasa
11
La Nuez
Rancho Arriba
Villa Altagracia
13
San Felipe
S. José de Ocóa
Presa Jiguey
SANTO DOMINGO
Las Yayitas
SIERRA EL NÚMERO
El Cruce del Quince
Azua
41
Cambita Garabito
Casa Caoba
La Toma
2
Presa de Valdesia
Puerto Tortuguero
Puerto Viejo
Pueblo Viejo
Bahía de Ocoa
San Cristóbal
Bajos de Haina
Playa Monte Río
Yaguate
Palmar de Ocoa
Galeón
2
Najayo
Baní
Playa Najayo
Playa Palenque
Palenque
Playa Los Almendros
Las Salinas
CARIBBEAN SEA
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economically or environmentally. Environmentalists are lobbying hard in the Congress to stop any large-scale development and the good news is that, instead, a new crop of small, **eco friendly tourism** operations have sprouted in the past few years, both along the coast and in the densely forested mountains to the north.

On the other side of the mountains to the north, you'll come to **Lago Enriquillo**, one of the country's premier natural attractions, a vast lake the size of Manhattan teeming with birdlife and crocodiles along its eastern tip.

The **Carretera Sánchez** that stretches west from Santo Domingo to Azua, where it becomes Highway 44 and continues all the way to the border, is well paved and fairly easy to navigate, though west of Barahona you should watch out for some tricky turns atop high cliffs. Be prepared also for the highway to end abruptly at the major towns, only picking up again at the other side. Off the main highway you'll usually have to make do with rough dirt roads, though paved avenues lead from the Carretera to San José de Ocóa, Cabral, Las Salinas and Palenque. **Public transport** is simple between Santo Domingo and Barahona, with guaguas running in a steady stream between towns in daylight hours, at least hourly in the overnight hours. The guaguas thin out between Barahona and Paraíso, and only run every two hours or so between Paraíso and the border. Along the **Haitian border** itself the terrain is rough and the roads are poor-to-nonexistent, with no public transport to speak of.

San Cristóbal to Azua

Heading west from Santo Domingo you'll encounter **San Cristóbal**, **Baní** and **Azua**, three industrial towns founded at the outset of Spanish colonization. These days they don't net many visitors – understandable as they're congested and unappealing at first sight – but the nearby beaches make a trip here worth it for those willing to ferret them out. South of San Cristóbal a paved highway winds through the hills to **Najayo** and **Palenque**, admirable sandy beaches that host heavy crowds of locals on weekends. Away from the sea, a river dotted with cascades just south of **San José de Ocóa** is an equally appealing place for a hike or a swim, as are the popular **La Toma** pools north of San Cristóbal – themselves just 3km from this region's most impressive cultural sight, **El Pomier**, a series of caverns holding thousands of Taino petroglyphs.

The best beach can be found at **Las Salinas** south of Baní, a quiet coastal village surrounded by magnificent dunes and sporting a top-notch hotel. Near Azua you'll find undeveloped **Playa Monte Río**, which is pebbly in places but does boast one beautiful white-sand cove called **Playa Blanca**.

San Cristóbal and around

SAN CRISTÓBAL, Trujillo's home town, enjoyed its heyday during his rule and was the beneficiary of an enormous cathedral and two palatial presidential residences. The cathedral still stands – though there's little reason to visit it – but the mansions are now in ruins, and the cramped, asphalt city qualifies as one of the country's least appealing. That said, it is well situated for exploring some fascinating nearby sights, namely the **La Toma balneario** and **El Pomier caves** to the north, and it is close enough to Santo Domingo – just 30km west of the capital – to make it a day-trip.

El Cerro

The one sight within the city itself is **El Cerro** (The Hill), a 1940s Trujillo mansion perched atop a hill overlooking San Cristóbal and with distant views of the sea. The six-storey, semicircular structure is today an abandoned wreck, looking less like a private residence than the remnants of a bombed office building, but it still serves as a grim reminder of the dictator towering over the city as it decays. During Trujillo's tenure it boasted gold and silver plating and mahogany trim. In the old grounds is a field where local kids play baseball; they'll pester you to let them show you inside (where you'll find badly damaged murals by José Vela Zanetti) for a few pesos, but if you don't want their company you can also enter the building by yourself. To get there from the concrete Parque Central, take Avenida Luperón (the road to Baní) west and turn south at the Isla Gasolina.

North of San Cristóbal

There's far more of interest in the mountains north of San Cristóbal, including **Casa Caoba** (daily 8am–5pm), another one of Trujillo's abandoned mansions, which sits 2km north on Constitución, past the 6 de Noviembre highway and then east at the "La Toma" sign. A stylish building originally constructed entirely out of mahogany in 1938, with clean, stylized angles reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright, it was surrounded by manicured Japanese gardens that are now going to weed. Though plans to convert it into a historical attraction have been hyped for years, only modest renovation has been completed and you'll have to make do with the guard's informal tour (Spanish only; RD$50), which navigates through the various rooms, including a secret chamber through which the dictator's mistress was conducted to his bedroom, and a look at the intricately crafted, stacked woodwork still waiting to be cleaned up.

From the mansion it's due north to the archeological reserve at El Pomier and the La Toma pools. Two hundred and fifty metres north of Casa Caoba you'll run into a fork in the road; turn right for La Toma or left for El Pomier. **La Toma** (daily 8.30am–7.30pm; RD$10, parking RD$50), 9km north of Casa Caoba, consists of a series of large cemented pools supplied with fresh water from the Río Haina, and is extremely popular with locals on weekends. There's ample parking at the site, but you can also catch a guagua from San Cristóbal's Parque Central (RD$10).

Reserva Arqeológica El Pomier

El Pomier (daily 9.30am–5pm; RD$50 for park entrance, plus RD$500 for a guide; bring your own torch and wear boots) lies 10km north of the Casa Caoba fork and protects the most extensive collection of **cave pictographs** in the Caribbean – some as many as 2000 years old – though this claim to notoriety draws strangely few visitors. There are three major sets of caves, the other two being Borbón and Santa María; El Pomier is the only one open to the public.

Upon arrival, you'll be assigned a park guide (Spanish only) who will take you to the first of three enormous, easily accessible chambers, two of which hold a variety of Taino pictographs. In addition to scattered depictions of various birds and animals (which were once used for religious rituals) there are a number of interesting geological formations and one cave filled with thousands of **bats**. If you want to see the best petroglyphs, though, you're in for a bit of an adventure, including **rappelling** down some steep cave walls. Domingo Abreu (ⓣ682-1577, ⓔdomingoespele87@hotmail.com) runs regular trips to El Pomier from Santo Domingo for independent tourists and is the best person to contact if you want to go to the more spectacular, but somewhat inaccessible, caves.

Transport to El Pomier is via RD$10 pick-up trucks stationed at the north end of the San Cristóbal town market on Calle Juanto María and Francisco Peynado. They don't take off until the entire truck fills up, so you may want to travel instead via RD$50 *motoconcho*, which you can also pick up at the market.

The beaches

San Cristóbal is also close to a couple of terrific beaches, with guaguas departing regularly for them from the Parque Central. **Najayo**, along the Carretera Palenque 14km south of San Cristóbal, has an attractive strip of beige sand and several restaurants, the best being *La Criolla* with tasty grilled fresh fish. Six kilometres further along the highway and a bit more crowded, **Palenque** was named for a *cimarrón* encampment that survived here until the late eighteenth century. The beach at the town's western end has remarkably calm waters, perfect for lazing about, though you'll be joined by plenty of others, especially on weekends. The entrance is lined with a dozen or so outdoor **bar-restaurants** to serve the crowds, though the *La Cubanita* chicken shack and *Pizzería Mi Sitio* back in town are probably better bets. If you're here for longer than a day-trip, you can also check out the baseball camp of the San Diego Padres, which trains recruits year-round; look for the Padres sign on the road between Najayo and Palenque. There's also a decent bit of **nightlife** here on weekends and especially on Mondays, including live music at *Disco Sonida Anthony* in Palenque Town.

Practicalities

Guaguas heading east and west along the highway – as well as north to La Toma – take off from the Parque Central. During the day you can also catch a *público* every hour or so from the park to Najayo or Palenque.

The only good **hotel** in San Cristóbal is basic but clean *Aparta-Hotel Ayala*, Padre Ayala 110 (ⓣ528-3040; ①). More pleasant surroundings are offered at the beachfront campsite south of the city between Najayo and the village of El Limón, 🏃 *Rancho Campeche* (ⓣ686-1053, ⓦwww.ranchocampeche.com; ②), an extremely nice facility that offers three meals and a cabin room or a tent by the sea. They also offer horse riding and tours to area sites like El Pomier.

Baní

Thirty-five kilometres west of San Cristóbal, coastal **BANÍ** is relatively prosperous thanks to a nearby naval base and the saltpans that lie to the south of the city – an upswing that has spurred much population growth, if not exactly prettified the place. There are few diversions within town – the Parque Central is nice enough for people watching, and you can stop off at **Botánica Chango** on Duvergé and Carretera Las Calderas for a look at the wares used in the local folk religion. There's also a unique **fiesta patronal** held from June 15 to 24 in honour of San Juan Bautista, with dozens of musicians performing a distinctive Afro-Latin music called **sarandunga**, which has heavy rhythmic influences from Senegal but is unique to Baní.

Guaguas ply the highway linking Baní itself with San Cristóbal, Azua and beyond on a pretty constant basis, and you can pick them up along the highway or at the

Parque Central without much trouble. There's not much in the way of **accommodation** in Baní; the *Caribaní*, at the corner of San Tomé and Sánchez at the Parque Central (Ⓣ522-3871; ③), and *Alba*, on Mella and Billini (Ⓣ522-3590; ①), are downright shabby but will do at a pinch. **Restaurants** are slightly better: *Yarey*, a surprisingly competent pizzeria on the Parque Central; a traditional Dominican *comedor* called *Mi Estancia* on the corner of Mella and Billini; and a row of grilled-chicken shacks on Duarte a block north of the park. Most other necessities are clustered around the Parque Central.

Around Baní

Just outside town you'll find a number of good **beaches**, including the one most frequented by the locals, **Los Almendros**, 5km south of the Parque Central on Calle Duarte. It's not as spectacularly scenic as the others along the Barahona coast, but is serviceable enough; at the beach entrance you'll find a decent **restaurant**, *Brisas del Mar*, and the *Costa Brava* outdoor **disco**, which sometimes gets big-name live acts.

Las Salinas

More rural and far more beautiful is **LAS SALINAS**, 16km southwest at the end of the Carretera Las Calderas. This small town consists of little more than a few dozen houses scattered about a white-sand beach, surrounded by sand dunes, saltpans and rolling hills. The beach here is sandy and pleasantly under-used, easily the best place to spend a day east of Barahona. It's also a great place for **windsurfing** and the small **resort** *Salinas High Wind Center*, Puerto Hermosa 7 (Ⓣ310-8141, Ⓦwww.hotelsalinas.net; ④), serves as an informal windsurfing club on weekends – though you'll have to bring your own equipment. It caters mostly to wealthy Dominicans, and has garishly painted but modern and comfortable rooms with good water pressure, a rarity in these parts, and also a pool, bar and disco. The setting is beautiful, with placid Caribbean waters lapping a small private beach, and the patio **restaurant** serves the best seafood in the area; try the house speciality, lobster *criolla* (ask for two big lobsters instead of three little ones) or the *lambí*; you can expect to spend around US$20 for a meal here.

The downside is that there's no service late at night and you'll have to buy a phone card in the town centre to make calls. The hotel is also hard to reach on the phone, so you're probably best off just turning up.

Outside the small hotel in Las Salinas, you won't find many **accommodation** options in the immediate area. There is some **public transport** linking Las Salinas to Baní: you'll find guaguas headed between the two every hour or so.

San José de Ocóa

Tucked away in the mountains along the Río Nizao, the mountain hamlet of **SAN JOSÉ DE OCÓA**, 27km north of the Carretera Sánchez along Highway 41, attracts weekenders from across the country (though few foreign visitors), mainly in the summer months when temperatures in the valley below can be sweltering. Most are here to visit the river *balneario* and take advantage of the lovely, sometimes rugged, mountain landscape that surrounds the town.

Arrival and information

The town itself is easygoing and fairly modest, consisting mostly of clapboard shacks in a majestic setting, perched atop a high hill with views stretching across the southern Cordillera Central. **Guaguas** arrive and depart every hour or so during daylight hours from Baní, San Cristóbal and Santo Domingo along the south end of the town's attractive Parque Central, which also holds a Banco Popular with **ATM** and phone centre.

Accommodation

San José **accommodation** is plentiful but no-frills, including *Sagrato de Jesús*, Cañada and San José (ⓣ558-2432; ①), and *Pensión San Francisco*, 37 Pimentel (ⓣ558-2741; ①), neither especially luxurious but perfectly acceptable, with private cold-water showers and cable TV; *Sagrato* also has some rooms with lukewarm water and a/c, and a good cafeteria. The low-end *Rancho Francisco* cabins (no phone; ②) lie 2km south of town on the main highway, but they're more expensive than the central hotels and on weekends the grounds are transformed into an outdoor dancehall, making it noisy late into the night (though they do feature good Dominican live acts on occasion). Alternatively, there's plenty of space in the area for **camping**, though nowhere is it regulated; for security's sake, you should ask permission from a local farmer.

Activities

El Manantiel, the local river *balneario*, is 1km south of town down a dirt road off the highway. Here you'll find several good spots for swimming among the boulders and ice-cold cascades. Plenty of other people – particularly families – opt for the outfits that siphon off fresh water from the river into large swimming pools, such as **Las Jessicas** (daily 8.30am–10pm; RD$10), down a steep incline on the opposite side of the road, where there's a diving board and a water slide. It also turns into a popular dancehall at night.

Hiking trails abound in the surrounding countryside, and the easiest option is to simply set off on one of the dirt paths spiralling away from San José into the hills. Rancho Cascada, Alcantara 12 (ⓣ890-2332, ⓦwww.ranchocascada.com), runs a variety of tours including mountain biking, canoeing, horse riding and canyoning, ranging from a half-day (around US$20) to multi-day excursions into the Cordillera Central. By far their most popular option is the overnight **canoe trip** down the Río Nizao past small pueblos and beautiful scenery to the **Presa Jiguey**, a remote dam and lake northeast of town. The excursion costs around US$80 and involves a night at a campsite and two days of canoeing, swimming and fishing. To get to Presa Jiguey yourself you'll need your own transport; turn right at the fork in the road just north of town, and another right 5km further on. A more adventurous option is to drive the stunning but extremely rough **San José–Constanza road**, leading north of town right into the heart of the Cordillera Central; it's only passable with a good 4WD, spare tyres and emergency supplies.

Eating, drinking and nightlife

You'll find a couple of good **restaurants**, including *Baco*, half a block west of the Parque Central, with *chivo guisado* (goat stew) or chicken with rice, beans and plantains for RD$60. **Nightlife** consists of half a dozen bars spread out along the highway south of town, plus the *El Roble Ocóa Disco* on the Parque Central, with live music on weekends. In addition, *La Bella Juliana Car Wash* has a bar and a **pool table** on its top floor.

Azua

Established in 1504 by the future conqueror of Cuba Diego Velázquez, **AZUA** is among the oldest cities in the New World. In the early sixteenth century, Mexico conquistador Hernán Cortes served as its mayor, but despite this lofty history there's nothing left of the original city, which was demolished by an earthquake in 1751. On top of that, Haitian armies occupied Azua multiple different times in the nineteenth century and, despite being repelled in the El Número mountain passes to the east, left the village virtually sacked. Although a celebration is held on 19 March every year to commemorate an 1844 battle that resulted in victory over the Haitians, the town's **Pueblo Viejo** holds no colonial ruins, and **Puerto Viejo** – the old port – is merely an industrial site for the extraction of natural gas. If you are travelling between Lago Enriquillo and San Juan de la Managua, you will have to change guaguas here. Although most travellers rush through, Azua does boast a couple of decent **beaches**.

Arrival and information

Azua lies sprawled out along either side of the Carretera Sánchez. The **phone centre**, **ATM** and bank are all on 19 de Marzo a block east of the Parque Central. Azua is the jumping-off point for those headed to Lago Enriquillo and San Juan; the informal **guagua** station is nearby on the corner of Calle Duarte and Garrido, with the Caribe Tours station right around the corner. During the day guaguas depart east to Santo Domingo and west to either Barahona or San Juan de la Maguana every twenty minutes or so.

The beaches

Azua's beaches are used almost exclusively by locals, but there are a couple of fairly respectable ones, including the pebble beach **Playa Monte Río**, 2km south of town. To reach the waterfront, take the turnoff at the Brugal sign, on Azua's eastern edge. Fishing boats bob on its calm waters and a few locally run outdoor restaurants, including *La Rosa*, *Euromar* and *San Miguel*, serve grilled fresh fish with the requisite accompaniments of plantains, rice and beans here. Five hundred metres west of these establishments, **Playa Blanca** is a more enticing and less rocky option, a placid turquoise cove with pure-white sand – though unfortunately home to a large population of sand fleas at night.

Accommodation

You won't have much need for Azua's few **hotels**, though if you're desperate, the cleanest of the very basic bunch is *Las Flores*, on the Carretera Sánchez at the town's west entrance (no phone; ①). To escape the noise of downtown Azua, head to the otherwise un-noteworthy *Princesa del Caney* (no phone; ①), 1km west of town on the main highway.

Eating and drinking

There are a number of **restaurants** to choose from, but most serve the same line-up of local staples like *la bandera dominicana* and *pollo al carbón*. The best of these is *Mesón Suizo*, two blocks north of the Parque Central, which has good steaks and creole fish dishes in a comfortable environment. More homely is *Francia* on the Carretera Sánchez at the eastern end of town, which serves a variety of traditional Dominican dishes, such as garlic shrimp or chicken with rice, off a modest menu of two or three options that varies nightly.

San Juan de la Maguana and around

Eighty kilometres northwest of Azua and fifty largely impassable, mountainous kilometres north of Lago Enriquillo, **SAN JUAN DE LA MAGUANA** is a major hub of agricultural transport for the surrounding valley. There's not much to draw you to this area apart from the colourful **religious festivals** held throughout the year, including a giant Altagracia procession on January 21; the *fiesta patronal* for San Juan from 15 to 24 June, which features a full week of big-name live bands playing in the Parque Central; Semana Santa (Holy Week), when you'll see processions with large Haitian-style *gagá* bands and the crowning of a city queen; and **Espíritu Santo**, seven weeks after Semana Santa, the most fascinating ritual. Festivities for the latter begin in the small town of El Batey, 18km northeast of San Juan, with an all-day procession in which a porcelain statuette draped in a white cape is carried to the big city. Along the way, many marchers become possessed by the Holy Spirit, Liborio and various Taino ghosts; these "horses" – as the possessed are known – behave in all sorts of ways: collapsing to the ground in a trance-like state, speaking in tongues, or prancing about like coquettish young girls.

Practicalities

San Juan is the terminus for many **bus routes** that head west from Santo Domingo. Caribe Tours has a terminal on Calle Independencia at the town's eastern gate, while Transport del Valle maintains a station at Duarte 40 near Independencia. With so many bus companies, you'll find one departing hourly during the day until around midnight; you'll need to use **guaguas** to get to Las Matas or the Haitian border at Elias Piña, and can catch them either at the Parque Central or the town's western gate.

San Juan is a big town, but it's still pretty far off the tourist trail; most of its **hotels** are either *cabañas turísticas* or geared towards passing businesspeople. Of the latter, *Areito*, on Capotillo and Mella (☎557-2045; ③), is the best, with well-kept rooms, attentive service, a/c, hot water and cable TV. For **food** you're best off heading to *Rincón Mexicano* on 27 de Febrero 28 and Capotillo, which has good soft-shell tacos, fajitas, enchiladas and other Mexican favourites. There are also a number of useful facilities in town, including a **phone centre** on 16 de Agosto 28, a Western Union on 16 de Agosto and Anacaona, and a 24hr **ATM** on Anacaona near Independencia.

North of San Juan

The mountainous area **north of San Juan** was long inhabited by escaped slaves who established *cimarrón* settlements throughout the Hispaniola mountains. Their religious traditions have been transformed over the last century by the veneration of **Liborio**, who is still considered a living messiah by many here (see box opposite); if you're interested in the religion, it's worth checking out the local holy sites.

From San Juan a paved road leads 6km north to the **Corral de los Indios**, one of the largest Taino sites on the island and scene of an infamous Spanish massacre. Folk tradition has it that this location was once the capital of a native leader named Caonabo and the Xaragua *cacique* that he ruled at the time of Columbus. Caonabo was tricked into captivity by the Spaniards in 1495, who presented him with a set of arm-and-leg chains which they told him were a form of ceremonial jewellery. When Caonabo put the chains on to honour the Spaniards, they promptly threw him into prison, shipping him off to Spain in 1496. He died of self-imposed starvation en route.

The Liborista massacre

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a charismatic faith healer named **Liborio** established a self-reliant commune in the mountains north of San Juan de la Maguana that attracted thousands of followers. Local peasants considered him a reincarnation of Jesus and worshipped him as such, though detractors maintained that he planned to march on Santo Domingo and set up a Voodoo theocracy with himself as high priest. He was branded a bandit by the American army during their occupation of the 1910s and 1920s; seeing his populist commune as a threat to their rule, they put a bounty on his head and sent out regular patrols to hunt him down. For six years he evaded capture by hiding out in the heart of the Cordillera Central with a handful of followers. When he was finally caught and murdered by American troops in 1922, rumours quickly spread through San Juan and Las Matas that Liborio had risen from the dead, and the soldiers had to dig up his corpse, drive it through the streets of San Juan in the back of a truck and display it in the Parque Central to prove otherwise.

The movement he founded, though, continued, with several local *brujos* claiming to have had direct spiritual contact with Liborio. In the early 1960s a group called **Palma Sola**, run by two peasant priests known as The Twins, set up a 1200-member utopian Liborista commune in the fields just west of Las Matas, by all accounts peaceful but deemed subversive enough by the government that on December 11, 1962, the military dropped napalm on them from airplanes – burning six hundred people to death and sending the rest scattering back to their villages. The fields outside Las Matas bear no marker to indicate that the commune members died here, but the Liboristas still dwell in the mountains around San Juan.

All that's left of Caonabo's city can be found in a large field set off by a stone circle, which is visible from the highway and marked by a sign on your left. Since these corrals were originally used to play a game similar to football, it seems appropriate that locals now use it as a baseball field.

Las Matas de Farfán

Founded in 1780, laid-back **LAS MATAS DE FARFÁN** was named for an eighteenth-century Azua merchant who would stop here for the night on his way to the border, to sleep beneath an enormous tamarind tree by the side of the local river.

At Las Matas' heart is its **Parque Central**, generally acknowledged to be the most beautiful in the nation, with a lovely gazebo standing in the middle of a densely wooded area. Every Sunday at 8pm the local symphonic band plays under the gazebo as the whole town comes out to watch. Wednesday and Saturday are **market days**, when hundreds of *campesinos* from the surrounding countryside come into town to sell their produce along Calle Independencia.

Practicalities

Guaguas stop at the corner of St Lucia and 19 de Marzo; they depart eastward hourly to San Juan and Santo Domingo, and westward to the border at Elias Piña.

Las Matas has better **hotels** than you'll find in most of the border towns, though that's not saying much. You still shouldn't expect hot water or air conditioning. *Independencia*, on Independencia (☎527-5698; ①), is the best of the bunch, with clean basic rooms and private bath. For **meals**, *Gloria's* on the southeast corner of the park has a nice outdoor courtyard and a menu of standard Dominican dishes, along with fresh pastries and coconut sweets.

Barahona and around

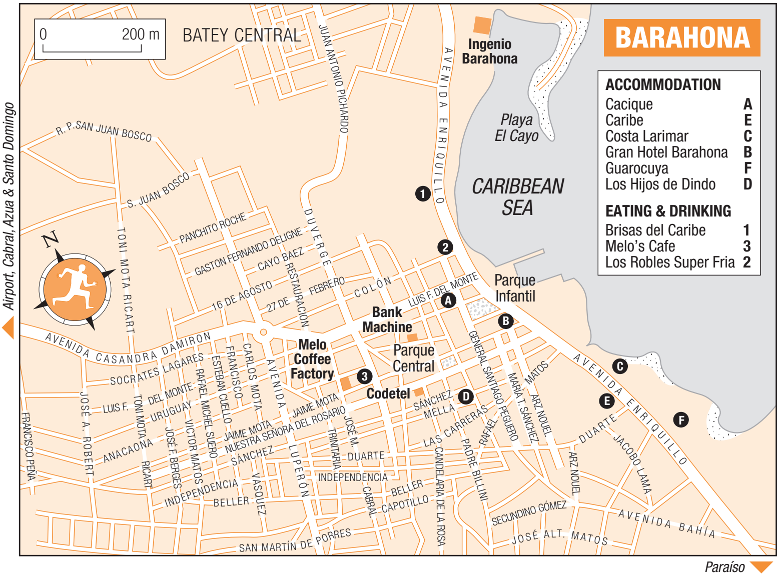
The city of Barahona isn't an especially pleasant place, but it does have a number of hotels, and so many travellers use it as a base from which to roam the magnificent coastline that runs west of town all the way to **Parque Nacional Jaragua**. Most memorable along this stretch are the *balnearios* at **San Rafael** and **Los Patos**, long popular with locals but undiscovered by the outside world. Away from the coastline, the **Sierra Bahoruco** mountain range offers real wilderness hiking, while a boat trip on the **Laguna Cabral** is an idyllic bird watching opportunity.

Barahona

Founded by Haitian General Touissant L'Ouverture in 1802 as an alternate port to Santo Domingo and once the informal capital of Trujillo's multimillion-dollar sugar industry, **BARAHONA** has fallen on hard times due to the low price of sugar globally and the transition in the US from sugar to corn syrup in all manner of sweetened products. Evidence of this downturn abounds in the uncared-for roads rutted to the point of near impassability. Nevertheless, the town itself is a convenient base and the Malecón boasts some good **nightlife**, to be enjoyed after a day's exploring.

Arrival and information

Coastal Highway 44 connects the city with Azua, Baní and Santo Domingo to the east before continuing west all the way to the border, and a well-marked turnoff


BARAHONA
ACCOMMODATION
Cacique A
Caribe E
Costa Larimar C
Gran Hotel Barahona B
Guarocuya F
Los Hijos de Dindo D
EATING & DRINKING
Brisas del Caribe 1
Melo's Cafe 3
Los Robles Super Fria 2
0 200 m
BATEY CENTRAL
Ingenio Barahona
Playa El Cayo
CARIBBEAN SEA
Parque Infantil
Bank Machine
Parque Central
Melo Coffee Factory
Codetel
N
Airport, Cabral, Azua & Santo Domingo
Paraíso
AVENIDA ENRIQUILLO
AVENIDA CASANDRA DAMIRON
AVENIDA BAHÍA
AVENIDA LUPERÓN
JUAN ANTONIO PICHARDO
R. P. SAN JUAN BOSCO
S. JUAN BOSCO
PANCHITO ROCHE
GASTON FERNANDO DELIGNE
CAYO BAEZ
16 DE AGOSTO
27 DE FEBRERO
DUVERGE
RESTAURACIÓN
COLÓN
LUIS F. DEL MONTE
TONI MOTA RICART
SOCRATES LAGARES
URUGUAY
ANACAONA
JOSÉ A. ROBERT
FRANCISCO PEÑA
JOSÉ F. BERGES
VICTOR MATOS
RAFAEL MICHEL SUERO
ESTEBAN CUELLO
FRANCISCO
CARLOS MOTA
JAIME MOTA
NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL ROSARIO
SÁNCHEZ
INDEPENDENCIA
BELLER
VASQUEZ
TRINITARIA
JOSÉ M. CABRAL
DUARTE
CAPOTILLO
MELLA
LAS CARRERAS
CANDELARIA DE LA ROSA
PADRE BILLINI
RAFAEL
GENERAL SANTIAGO PEGUERO
MARIA T. SANCHEZ
MATOS
ARZ NOUEL
JACOBO LAMA
SECUNDINO GÓMEZ
JOSÉ ALT. MATOS
SAN MARTÍN DE PORRES

11km east of town leads northwest to San Juan de la Maguana, Las Matas de Farfán and Elias Piña. All guaguas except the ones to and from Santo Domingo pick up and drop off at the old *mercado* (market) two blocks north of the Malecón on Calle Damirón, with vans departing every 30min southwest down the coast to Paraíso and northwest to Jimaní; **Santo Domingo** guaguas drop off directly on the Malecón and run hourly. The Caribe Tours station is at Anacaona 4, just off the Parque Central, with morning and evening routes headed east to Santo Domingo. You'll find a phone centre and Banco Popular with 24hr **ATM** machine at the Parque Central. There's also a small **internet café** on the corner of Calle Mesón and Uruguay (RD$60/hour).

Accommodation

Barahona has a wider range of hotels than you'll find elsewhere in the Southwest. Most **accommodation** is within a couple of blocks of the open seaside **Malecón** (also known as Avenida Enriquillo), four blocks south of the Parque Central.

Cacique Uruguay 2 behind the Parque Infantil, Malecón ☎524-4620. One of the cleanest rock-bottom options, with private cold-water baths a block from the waterfront. ②

Costa Larimar ☎524-5111, Ⓦwww.hotelcostalarimar.com. A "resort" that never quite took off, this is still the best hotel in town, though service is not especially attentive here. Does offer majestic views of both the sea and the mountains, and the rooms are clean with a/c, television, telephone and even room service. There's also a small private beach. You're best off not going all-inclusive, as the mediocre meals add about US$20 a night. ④

Gran Hotel Barahona Mota 5 ☎524-3442. A nice hotel, though away from the waterfront. Service is commendable and the rooms are clean and comfortable, with a/c, TV, phone and real hot water. ③

Guarocuya Malecón 15 ☎524-4121. If you want water but can't quite afford the resort, the views of the beach are great from this boardwalk hotel, though the service is sub-par and the showers are lukewarm at best. ③

Los Hijos de Dindo 30 de Mayo 39 ☎524-5510. If you're sailing on a very tight budget, this is the place for you. They keep the place clean, it's quiet and you get a private, cold-water bath. ①

The Town

There's not terribly much to see in Barahona, though it's a decent-sized town. The **Malecón** is a fun place to pass an evening as it gets crowded with food shacks and partying locals at night; its major landmark is a **Parque Infantil** (children's park) on Calle Uruguay with a slide in the shape of the solar system. West of the park, past a series of beach shacks, is a modest stretch of sand bordered by mangroves along the *Hotel Guarocuya* that's quite pretty. The town's most popular beach, though, is **Playa El Cayo**, a long stretch of sand that lies at the opposite end of the boardwalk beyond **Ingenio Barahona**, the country's largest sugar mill, now saddled with debt and only functioning sporadically. The beach is typically crowded during the day with locals and vendors selling grilled fish.

Eating

There are a couple of exceptional **restaurants** in town. For cheaper eats you'll find the expected array of fast-food vendors in the Parque Central and along the Malecón.

Brisas del Caribe ☎524-2794. On the far eastern end of the Malecón is this more formal seafood restaurant with impeccable service and a slew of great menu offerings, including grilled lobster, garlic shrimp and an amazing kingfish filet. It's also the only place on the island where you're likely to be served a large Presidente bottle in a champagne ice bucket; meals run around US$25.

Melo's Café Anacaona 12 ☎524-5437. The best in town, an unpretentious little diner with delicious American breakfasts (try the French toast), fruit shakes and nightly dinner specials at 7pm for RD$50; don't miss the goat dish with bananas, plantains and avocados if they have it.

Drinking and nightlife

Barahona has a number of popular **discos**. The ones away from the waterfront are a bit seedy, but *Costa Sur* is a fun outdoor dancehall that's worth checking out, located on the Malecón opposite the *Costa Larimar* hotel. Also on the park is *La Campina*, an outdoor beer hall where patrons sit at tables and look out at the park. The east end of the Malecón is another major centre for nightlife, most of it gathered around the unremarkable restaurant *Gazebo de las Flores*, including a fun terrace hangout called *Los Robles Super Fria* and a line of liquor shacks where you can dance outdoors to boom-box merengue.

North of Barahona

Fifteen kilometres northwest of Barahona, the small town of **CABRAL** sits on the eastern edge of the Parque Nacional Bahoruco, though you'll still have to go some distance before entering the park itself (see p.266). Cabral is home to the serene **Laguna Cabral**, a lovely patch of water and habitat for numerous birds, including Orilla, Criolla and Florida ducks, flamingos, ibises and herons.

Otherwise, the only reason for coming is if you're around during Semana Santa, when the **Carnival Cimarrón** is held, a week of exuberant celebrations in which participants don devil masks (*diablos cojuelos*) and ornate costumes, and carry bullwhips. You can purchase a mask, if you like, by asking around at the park station at any time of year.

North on Highway 48, which picks up just past El Peñon, begins some of the densest and most primitive **sugar-cane** farming areas in the country. Along the road you'll see Haitian *bateyes* (see box, opposite) and the ruins of the old railroad that Trujillo built to ship the cane harvested here to the Barahona mill.

Practicalities

Guaguas depart hourly from Barahona's Parque Central, stopping briefly at Cabral every hour or so during the day, headed southeast to Barahona or west to Jimaní. You can see the lagoon either by 2hr **boat tour** from the park station at the north end of town (RD$1950, includes park entrance and guide), or independently by heading north on the paved road that skirts the lagoon to the east to a pueblo called **El Peñon**, from where a **dirt road** leads west of town to the lagoon. Unfortunately, you can't get on the water from there, but you will at least have a good vantage point.

There are no **hotels** in Cabral, but it's close enough to Barahona for an easy half-day trip.

Polo Magnético

Back south of Cabral, about 10km down the Carretera Polo, the **Polo Magnético** is the stuff of rural legend, a place where the law of gravity is apparently defied. At an upward incline in the highway, marked by a roadside billboard, you can pull off on the right-hand fork and put your car in neutral; it will seem to be slowly pulled up the hill, as will any round object that you place on the pavement.

Haitian bateyes

For most of the twentieth century, **sugar** was the crop around which the Dominican economy revolved. Though tourism recently replaced it as the top source of foreign currency, sugar plantations still exist all along the southern half of the island, their vast expanses of cane harvested by migrant Haitian labourers who live in meagre company barracks known as **bateyes**.

As early as the late nineteenth century, depressed sugar prices made Dominican labour too expensive for the sugar companies, and masses of **migrant workers** were imported from the British Antilles to fill the void. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, even this labour became too expensive, and formal agreements were reached that paid the Haitian government to recruit and export tens of thousands of cane cutters each year. The *batey* workers came from the poorest rural parts of Haiti, encouraged by the opportunity to save US$30–50 over the course of a season – in four or five years that would be enough to build a modest house and work a small subsistence farm back in their home country. Many, however, have come back empty-handed or, worse, never left at all.

The formal agreement has dissolved, and Haitians who cross into the Dominican Republic to work in the sugar fields do so *aba fil* (under the fence). Since the earthquake in 2010, thousands more Haitians have poured over the border in desperation for work, making the *bateyes* more crowded and wages even lower.

Batey **life** involves horribly substandard conditions. Manually cutting cane with machetes is backbreaking work, and the labourers are paid as little as RD$3 per tonne. They have to work at least fourteen hours a day in order to feed themselves, pay a baroque system of bribes to police officers and company officials and save a few pesos for the return to Haiti. Most *bateyes* have no bathrooms or running water, and workers must walk a kilometre or more for water and sleep five or six to a small room. Every year thousands of Haitians fail to earn enough for the **journey home**, and are forced to stay in the *batey* during the dead season, when there's little work available. The inhuman conditions have led various international human rights groups to declare the situation tantamount to slavery, but there has been little in the way of reform to date.

A group of student surveyors from Santo Domingo's Catholic University established that the "pole" is an optical illusion, but many locals believe that the miracle results from the presence of magnetically charged ore beneath the road's surface.

South of Barahona

The gorgeous coastline south of Barahona is the region's premier attraction, yet it remains virtually undiscovered by outsiders. Drive the length of it, which takes roughly half a day, and you'll find innumerable small beach coves tucked between high oceanfront cliffs; the first beaches to head for are **San Rafael**, **Paraíso** and **Los Patos**. Also worth a visit are the **larimar mines** north of Arroyo and the flamingo-inhabited **Laguna Oviedo**.

Quemaito

Heading south from Barahona along Highway 44, **Playa Saladilla** is just 3km away, a little sand cove protected by a reef, with shallow, calm water for swimming. An equally sheltered but more developed beach is at **Quemaito** 3km further on, home to a secluded hotel and a beautiful little stretch of sand that gets only moderate traffic. Boasting both natural beauty and gourmet cuisine, the singular *Casablanca* **hotel** (ⓣ471-1230, ⓦwww.hotelcasablanca.com.do; ③) is set along rambling rural grounds perched on a cliff over the beach. The rooms boast few amenities but are charming nonetheless, with private cold-water bath and fan. What draws people here is the food, prepared by the proprietor, a gourmet French chef. Dinner, which will cost you US$30 on top of the price of your room, is served according to the French table d'hôte tradition, by which customers tell the chef what they want for dinner in the morning, she goes to the market and buys everything fresh, prepares it, and everyone sits together for the evening meal. If this seems a little too communal for your taste, you can head 1km east to the majestically set *Playa Azul* hotel (ⓣ429-5375; ④), which has standard a/c rooms with twin beds, a nice little restaurant and spectacular bird's-eye views of the coast from its perch atop a treeless seaside hill.

Arroyo and the larimar mines

From Quemaito, the rainforested **Sierra Bahoruco** (see p.266) rises above the shore, dropping off precipitously at the water's edge and leading to some hard-crashing surf along much of the coast. Five kilometres further southwest is the pueblo **Arroyo**, a tiny town with a dirt road turnoff that leads through the mountains to the local **larimar mines**. Along the road you'll see several stands where locals sell lumps of larimar for US$5–15, depending on size and quality. You're also free to visit the actual mines, though the road is rough (see Practicalities, below).

The main set of mines are little more than deep holes in the ground supported by wooden frames, but it's fascinating to watch local **miners** clamber acrobatically up and down them; they'll also sell you raw chunks of the stones if you're interested in a souvenir. A hundred metres down the road, a large river with small **cascades** makes a good spot to cool off after the dusty journey.

Practicalities

If you want to visit the mines but would rather have someone sort the logistics for you, there's a great local eco tour outfit based in Paraíso, *Eco Tour Barahona* (ⓣ243-1190, ⓦwww.ecotour-repdom.com), that run **day-trips** there from any town nearby.

To visit the working mines under your own steam, take the dirt turnoff at the cockfighting arena and head 8km through lush rainforest and past small mountain *campos*, then walk up the hill from the road. Keep in mind, though, that the road is quite bad, and you're in danger of losing a tyre if you are not in a 4WD; it's also possible to ask around in Arroyo for a *motoconcho* that will take you up for RD$100.

If you're interested in **staying the night** in Arroyo, which is a perfectly nice little village, the only good option is *Aparta Hotel Pontevedra* (ⓣ341-8462, ⓦwww.pontevedracaribe.com; ⑤), a largely characterless set of concrete full-service apartments with kitchen that has easy beachfront access. There's also a little **bar/disco** called *Mina Larimar* in town that serves as one of the more pleasant hangouts along the coastal highway.

Baoruco and La Ciénaga

It's another 5km along Highway 44 to **BAORUCO** and **LA CIENAGA**, a pair of tiny adjoining fishing villages with a very pretty beach and some small resorts. Aside from the hotels, it's a sleepy little place, and the only activity you'll find is at the beach bars set up along the north end of the waterfront.

Practicalities

There is no **guagua** stop per se here, but they pick up and drop off at various points along the highway. You'll see at least one an hour plying the route in each direction; a lot of locals also opt for hitchhiking, but few foreigners follow suit.

The best **hotel** within Baoruco is *Casa Bonita* (Ⓣ540-5908, Ⓦwww.casabonitadr.com; ⑦), set on a hilltop above town. Catering mostly to wealthy Dominicans, the hotel has a view of the ocean from up high, along with a swimming pool and an elegant **restaurant**. Don't expect 24hr service, though, as most of the hotel staff go home at 8pm; non guests can have dinner on the patio for around RD$700. For a more full-service hotel on the coast in Baoruco, try *Gran Marquiz* (Ⓣ524-1771; ④), with modest but clean, hot-water rooms sitting right on the sand. A reasonable breakfast and dinner are included in the price.

Around Baoruco

There are a couple of **mountain hideaways** worth checking out while you're passing through Baoruco. The closest (but still difficult to access without a 4WD) is *Casa de Tarzan* (Ⓣ977-4280, Ⓔcasadetarzan@gmail.com; ④), a rambling country manor set along a waterfall and with accommodation for up to 12 people. It's 3km of rough dirt road that crosses a river twice, but once there you're likely to have the entire place to yourself, along with half a dozen hiking trails and a waterfront *balneario*. They have a full kitchen for guests to use but you'll have to bring your own supplies, and give them at least a week's advance notice before you expect to arrive; this is too remote for public transport so you'll need to take your own **car** or arrange for them to pick you up on the coast.

Cachote

Further afield via another rough road from La Ciénaga is **Cachote**, which trades total isolation for a chance to interact with locals and learn about *campesino* culture. A marked dirt road from La Ciénaga leads twenty gruelling kilometres into the mountains, crossing back and forth over a winding river to this isolated mountain outpost set squarely in the middle of a large cloudforest. So rough is the trip that you're best off contacting the town's community-run ecotourism outfit, Microempresa Ecoturística Cachote (Ⓣ899-4702, Ⓔecoturismocomunitariocachote@yahoo.com), to pick you up from the coast. A visit can be done either as a day-trip or an overnight stay in their clean but extremely rustic cabins. Either way you'll have an opportunity to ride mules across mountain passes, hike one of their eight major trails, and visit with local *campesino* farmers and learn about their way of life, with special emphasis on some of their folk medicine practices. It's the best opportunity on the island for getting an up-close look at life in the Dominican *campos*.

San Rafael and Los Patos

Five kilometres beyond Baoruco, the pueblo **San Rafael** holds an enticing beach, if one with a strong, crashing surf, crowded with Dominicans on weekends but only moderately populated the rest of the week. Fortunately, a **waterfall** thrums down the nearby mountains and forms a natural swimming pool at the beach entrance, with an unobtrusive artificial barrier walling it in so that water slowly pours over the edge into the sea. The area around here is a popular **camping spot**, complete with public shower and bathroom facilities, and some shacks nearby sell excellent grilled lobster and fresh fish. You can **hike** along the river's cascades into the mountains, or head up a turnoff just west of the beach, with panoramic views atop a high cape. From the beach you can also climb up a series of small cascades that are a popular local bathing spot.

Another stunning beach lies 5km further west along the coast beyond Paraíso in **LOS PATOS**, where the ocean is joined again by a river descending from the mountains to form a freshwater swimming pool. The beach, surrounded by dense mangroves, is pretty lively throughout the week, with vendors lining the sand to take care of most visitors' culinary and souvenir needs.

Practicalities

As with other spots along the coastal highway, you can pick up a **guagua** by hanging out in town by the side of the road. They arrive at least hourly in both directions.

You'll have to head to Paraíso for ATMs and pharmacies (see p.264), but the town has a surprisingly modern **hotel** with its own amazing Italian restaurant, *Oasi Italiano* (☎829/918-6969, Ⓦwww.lospatos.it; ④). The entrance is at the end of a dirt road in the back of town, but the way is well signposted. The rooms here are comfortable and have hot water, plus there's a swimming pool and hot tub on site, and a genial bar that's typically open quite late; regardless of whether or not you stay here, it has the best eats in town. For the true "roughing it" experience you can check out the one alternative, *Virginia*, Calle Peatonal (no phone; ①), pretty basic with private cold-water bath, mosquito net and no toilet seats. The pueblo also has an excellent **restaurant**, *Pula*, on the highway across from Iglesia San Miguel, with fresh seafood cooked Italian- and *criolla*-style; choose from the *pescado con coco*, goat roasted in a creole gravy, and grilled lobster. They also play great old golden age Latin music that could have been torn straight out of the 1940s.

Paraíso

PARAÍSO, sandwiched between San Rafael and Los Patos, is the "big town" along this stretch where locals go for fiestas and weekend nightlife, and it's also where you'll need to go for **ATMs**, **pharmacies** and **phone centres**. But it still doesn't boast much in the way of hotels and its restaurants are typical *comedores*. It does have a long strand of superb sandy **beach** that can get brutally hot at mid day due to the lack of shade. Along the western end of the strand stands the *Hotel Paraíso* (☎243-1080; ②), a decent enough place to **stay** for the night, with a/c or fan, cable TV and a local-seafood **restaurant**. Alternately, you'll also find tasty Dominican fare at *Paola*, Highway 44 at Nouel, with daily specials for RD$100 – and there are over a dozen different *comedores* and street vendors within town offering pulled beef and pork, fried *chicarrones* and the like. When you're ready to head out of town, you'll find that **guaguas** meet at the corner of Nouel and Enriquillo, departing every 20min or so east and west along the highway.

If a night in Paraíso isn't to your liking, you can also head into the mountains to *Rancho Platón* for the night (☎561-1555; ④), a riverside *finca* deep in the Sierra Bahoruco comprising five guest rooms, each with private bath, and a natural swimming pool made from the channelled waters of the neighbouring waterfall. The proprietors can also arrange horse riding excursions but you need to reserve at least a week in advance.

Enriquillo

The beachfront remains uninterrupted for 11km beyond Los Patos, punctuated by number of small pueblos such as **Los Blancos**, where beneath a series of high wide cliffs you can have the pebbly beach pretty much to yourself. The first town of any real size is **ENRIQUILLO**, majestically set over a jagged limestone precipice. A broad beach stretches to the west, but there are no trees along it and thus little respite from the sun; perched at the edge of a sheer cliff directly above the beach is the most scenic *club gallístico* in the country; entry to the Saturday cockfights costs RD$20. For seclusion head a few metres east of town and look for the extremely steep dirt road that leads down to a pebble beach cove.

On the highway in the centre of town, *Hotel Dayira* (no phone; ①) is the nicest of the very basic local **accommodation** – and that's not saying much; it has private cold-water baths and a balcony with partial views of the ocean. *Cafetería Katerina* just off the beach is the place to go for **dinner**, serving fresh seafood cooked in a variety of spicy sauces. If you're headed further west, fill up first at the **petrol station** in Enriquillo – it's the last chance for petrol until Pedernales, 60km away, and the Pedernales station does not have unleaded.

Oviedo

A small desert town with little in the way of facilities, **OVIEDO** is worth a visit strictly as an entryway to **Parque Nacional Jaragua**, particularly the scenic **Laguna Oviedo** that lies at its entrance. The lake is often white with salt and features a wealth of birdlife on its shores; there's also precious little visitation here, which makes it more pleasant. Eco Tour Barahona (see p.262) offer **boat tours** here, where it is possible to visit some of the 24 islands, a number of which are inhabited by iguanas. If you just want to wander along Laguna Oviedo's shore, you'll pay a RD$50 fee at the **park entrance**, well marked at the east end of town; take the left fork in the road for the best birdwatching.

Guaguas are somewhat scarcer here than the eastern part of the highway, and you'll have to pick them up along the highway as they ply the route between Paraíso and here (every 30min or so) or Paraíso and Pedernales (hourly).

Pedernales and around

A dusty fishing village with a decent city beach, **PEDERNALES** sits on the Haitian border and is in close proximity to some of the most remote and beautiful of the Dominican Republic's protected park land, notably Jaragua national park and its famous protected beachfront at Bahía de las Àguilas. **Playa Pedernales** is the logical spot to head to within town, its uncrowded pebble beach offering a good view of the Jaragua peninsula to the east – it's actually possible to walk along the waterfront here for several kilometres all the way into **Jaragua national park**.

Practicalities

You can get to Pedernales via the **guaguas** that ply the route from Barahona, though in many cases you'll need to switch vehicles at Paraíso. You'll find a guagua leaving every hour or so; they pick up and drop off at the Shell station at Pedernales' entrance.

If you've made it this far, you may need to **stay the night**. Besides camping down at Bahía de las Águilas, the best option is *D'Oleo Mendez* on Calle Duvergé (☎524-0416; ②), which is surprisingly comfortable and well kept. Happily, there are some good **restaurants** in town. *Mary Federal Restaurant*, for example, situated off a sign-posted dirt road at the town entrance, has great grilled seafood. There are also a number of *bodegas* where you can stock up on provisions before taking off to Parque Nacional Jaragua.

There's a **Haitian market** held on Monday and Friday in the stretch of *territoria de nadie* just beyond the Dominican border outpost, featuring fake designer labels and housewares traded in exchange for foodstuffs. Within town there's a set of food shacks set up along the beach open for food and drink at night.

The beaches

Pedernales is close to the beaches that lie along the western coast of **Parque Nacional Jaragua**'s flint-shaped peninsula, accessible via a well-marked turnoff 12km east of town. There is no **public transport** within the national park, so you'll need your own transport to get to them. Three kilometres in, keep an eye out for **Cabo Rojo**, a beach near the bauxite plant that actually has quite lovely sand and is popular with local kids as well as pelicans. From Cabo Rojo the road devolves into dirt past a series of meagre Haitian beach shacks to the tiny seaside cave settlement known as **Las Cuevas**. *Rancho Cueva* (☎753-8058) is a shaded beachfront restaurant and bar that also runs **boat trips** (RD$2000 for return boat, up to six people) direct to **Bahía de las Águilas**, the crown jewel of beaches on the Jaragua peninsula, which is the easiest way to get out there. Even if you don't want to head out that far the beach here is pretty magnificent itself, and away from the restaurant you're unlikely to find a single other soul.

Bahía de las Águilas is spectacular, unspoiled and seemingly endless, in large part because it's smack-bang in the middle of the most inaccessible national park in the country. As there's very little **shade** it's advisable to bring an umbrella or something comparable. Pure white sand with the consistency of flour rings the rocky karst landscape for over 20km, and even with the new boat service there are typically no more than ten people for each of those kilometres. There's a small national park outpost 2km before the beach where you're required to pay a RD$50 park entrance fee, and it's possible to **camp** out here, although there are no facilities to speak of so bring your own food and supplies from Pedernales.

Just off the water is **Isla Beata**, a large uninhabited island that has a good variety of birdlife along it and some amazing beaches. There's no way to get here on your own, but Eco-Tour Barahona (see p.262) does regular **day-trips** out here, and can be convinced to arrange overnight camping.

Sierra Bahoruco

The best way to experience the pristine wilderness of the Sierra Bahoruco mountain range is along the border from the north, via the gravel track that begins at **Duvergé**, 80km north of Pedernales. Protected by the government as **Parque Nacional Bahoruco**, the mountain range contains a variety of ecosystems, including a vast stretch of pine forest that rivals the Cordillera Central in scope, large swaths of virgin rainforest and thirsty limestone desert in the foothills. While there are no nearby hotels to speak of, there are a couple of organized campsites in the park, and it's also possible to do a day-trip from Pedernales.

The ascent from Duvergé to **Puerto Escondido**, a village of shacks perched atop the mountain14km along the way, is easily the bleakest stretch of country, parched mountainside bereft of vegetation, but as the road veers sharply west from here the ecology gradually transforms into rainforest mixed with ferns and pine. After 25km you'll reach **El Aguacate**, a small military outpost on the border. From here the road leads steeply upward to **Loma del Torro**, the mountain range's highest point at 2368m, and primary-growth rainforest – dotted with orchids and wild strawberries – begins, with clouds passing below the road and several spots with spectacular views of Lago Enriquillo (see opposite).

Five kilometres south of Aguacate is the **potato market**. Very much worth a stop, the market is held daily in a series of tents in the middle of the wilderness where locals from both sides of the border swap Haitian potatoes for clothing and

Haitian *gourdes*. Locals play poker beneath the central tent and cook beans over a campfire, while their mules graze nearby.

This is prime **bird watching** territory, and if you fancy a stay in the wilderness, there's a nice cabin complex, *Villa Barrancoli* (Ⓦ sites.google.com/site/puertoescondidotourism; ②), just outside the park entrance at Puerto Escondido. A few kilometres further south you'll come across **Hoyo de Pelempito**, a 250m-deep canyon covered with virgin pine and inhabited with a variety of birdlife. The government has recently built a viewing platform here, and there are half a dozen great hiking trails in this area, especially for birders.

Getting to Hoyo de Pelempito and the national park involves either renting a car or getting *Villa Barrancoli* to pick you up, but there are **guaguas** every 30min to and from Duvergé via Azua, Barahona and Jimaní.

Lago Enriquillo and around

Habitat for tens of thousands of tropical birds and protected as Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos, **Lago Enriquillo** is an enormous 42km-long salt-water lake and slightly larger than the island of Manhattan. At the southern base of the Sierra Neiba, the lake sits at the lowest point in the Caribbean, a full 46m below sea level.

You can get on the water with one of the **boat tours** (daily 7.30am, 8.30am and 1pm; 2hr 30min; RD$300–2000, depending on group size) that depart from the park entrance 4km east of **La Descubierta**, near the lake's northwestern tip. You'll be taken to an enormous bird sanctuary filled with flamingos and hundreds of other **tropical birds**, which collectively form an unforgettable multicoloured spectacle; also a hit are the **American crocodiles** that inhabit this part of the lake, though you should take one of the morning tours if you want to see them – guides get into the water and steer them past the boat for a closer view. From there it's on to the arid, iguana-infested **Isla Cabritos** in the lake's centre, a sandy island covered with cactus where the half-tame rhinoceros iguanas crowd around you in the hope of being fed.

La Descubierta

LA DESCUBIERTA is a rather sleepy desert outpost that contains a small, somewhat inexplicable oasis – an **oak forest** fed by a cold sulphur spring, both of them bordering the concrete Parque Central and the Carretera Enriquillo that leads east from here to Barahona. Another minor local attraction is **Cueva de las Caritas**, a nearby cave that holds dozens of chiselled Taino faces. You'll find its entrance along the Carretera Enriquillo, 6km east of town and quite close to the Lago Enriquillo boat tour entrance; from town, you can catch a Neiba-bound guagua to the park entrance.

Practicalities

La Descubierta is accessible via **guagua** from Santo Domingo and Barahona via Neiba, with vehicles leaving town every two hours; you can also catch a vehicle from here to the Haitian border at Jimaní. Minibuses depart near the Parque Central, and you can catch any of the eastbound guaguas 6km to the boat tour entrance.

The most adequate of the limited **hotel** options is *Hotel del Lago*, Mella and Billini (no phone; ①), which despite being basic is perfectly clean and has nice proprietors. The town's only **restaurant**, *Brahaman's*, Deligne 1 at the Parque Central, is an authentic Dominican *cafetería* that serves up typically reasonable if unmemorable food.

East from La Descubierta

Many Dominicans make an afternoon of circling **Lago Enriquillo**, though it's hard to understand why; the area is a barren limestone desert, and most of the towns along the Carretera Enriquillo are rather bleak. At least you can enjoy beautiful **lake views** between La Descubierta and **Villa Jaragua**, a collection of clapboard desert huts with little in the way of facilities. A few kilometres east of there is **Neiba**, a slightly more substantive outpost where the townsfolk sell exceedingly sour grapes, the main local crop, along the highway.

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History

For a brief moment at the end of the fifteenth century, when Christopher Columbus "discovered" the New World and Spain set up its first colony here, the Dominican Republic took centre stage in world politics, only to be quickly shunted to the periphery of the Spanish Empire. It has since endured centuries of struggle for independence, having been occupied by France and Haiti and even Spain again for a time. After winning its freedom, the nation was kept in chaos by competing regional strongmen, an early twentieth-century occupation by the United States and then the iron fist of a despot. The last fifteen years, however, have witnessed the first three consecutive free and fair elections in the nation's history and a stable democracy has taken root.

Early settlers

Precious little is known about the **Arawaks**, the Dominican Republic's first inhabitants, who arrived in four distinct waves from the Orinoco and Amazon river basins in present-day Guyana and Venezuela, beginning around 3000 BC with the **Ciboneys**, nomads who moved among the island's caves, living and fishing along the rivers. Around 100 BC the Ciboneys were displaced by the more advanced **Igneri** Arawak culture, who left behind superb ceramics featuring geometric designs. In 600 AD the Igneri were in turn absorbed by the **Tainos**, a late Stone Age culture. The final Arawak migrants were the warlike **Caribes**, who began moving up the Antilles in 1100 AD and were making regular raiding forays along the eastern coast of Hispaniola when Columbus arrived.

Much of what we know today about **Taino culture** comes from excavated shards of their beautiful ceramics and the rock art they left in the many cave systems of the Greater Antilles, though firsthand accounts from the Spanish invaders add valuable context. The Spaniards reported that the Tainos tied two boards tightly to the heads of their newborn infants and left the heads bound for the first three years of life, resulting in an artificially flat, narrow forehead. Communal parties were held on feast days – which, as in today's Dominican Republic, occurred with astonishing frequency – where villages would gather to sing narrative **areito** songs, dance to drum-based music and get riotously drunk. Another major pastime during leisure hours was the **pelota** games (similar to football) held in large stone circles that can still be seen across the island. After the Taino evening meal, it was considered beneficial to head to the nearest river and induce vomiting as a means of cleansing the body.

The Taino **religion** was based on agriculture, honouring two major gods and a plethora of lesser deities. Most important were Yocahú – an immanent life guru of sorts, responsible for the growth of crops and animal reproduction – and the evil but incredibly powerful Huracán, who wreaked havoc on Taino society with (unsurprisingly) hurricanes and earthquakes when not properly appeased.

The Tainos developed a remarkable system of **agriculture** in which large mounds of mulch were sprinkled with seed, producing enough food for the entire community with very little labour. Staple crops grown in this way included yuca, peanuts, pumpkins and corn. Their **economy** was founded on subsistence barter and the concept of feudal labour was completely alien, making the Taino ill-prepared for the changes of the late fifteenth century.

The arrival of Columbus

Christopher Columbus was a member of the Genoese sailor and merchant community that came to dominate seafaring trade in Europe in the fifteenth century and, in the service of the Portuguese Crown, established fortified trading outposts along the northwestern coast of Africa. His purpose in crossing the Atlantic was both material and spiritual: he hoped to find an easy **waterway to China and Japan**, where he would sign an exclusive agreement to export Asian goods for gold and to find the mythical realm of the Christian king **Prester John**, which was believed to lie somewhere in Asia, cut off from the rest of Christianity by the Islamic empire. King John II of Portugal wasn't impressed with Columbus's scheme when it was put to him in 1485; his scientific advisers told him that, while the Earth was indeed round, Columbus had radically underestimated its size. Nor did Spain's **Ferdinand and Isabella** immediately bite; only after they had won the historic surrender of Granada from the Moors in 1492 did they feel confident enough to devote resources to this decidedly risky project.

On the strength of a large royal loan, Columbus outfitted three ships with ninety of the most experienced sailors he could find. He set off from the Canary Islands on September 9, 1492 and spent a troubling month at sea without spotting a shred of land. Then, on October 12, with his crew growing increasingly restless, the ships sighted the tiny Bahamian island that Columbus named **San Salvador**. Seeing nothing there of any value, they hurried on westward to Cuba, which was also quickly abandoned when it became clear that it wasn't Japan. From here the ships headed east to a large island that resembled Spain in shape. Naming it **Hispaniola**, Columbus skirted its northern coast, encountering Tainos adorned with gold jewellery, who told him of a mountain range further south called Cibao, which he optimistically assumed to be Cipango, then the European name for Japan. In an attempt to circle the island from the west, the *Santa María* grounded on a coral reef off the coast of modern-day Haiti on December 25 and had to be abandoned. Taking this as a sign from God, Columbus set up a small fort there, which he named **La Navidad** in honour of the date, left 25 men to guard it and headed back to Spain with his two remaining ships.

Upon returning with a new expedition of 1500 men – mercenaries from the Moorish wars along with a sprinkling of Spanish nobility – in late 1493, Columbus found that La Navidad had been burned to the ground by the Tainos and all of its settlers killed. Only a short distance to the east, a scenic, defensible cape was chosen as the site for the first small colony, **La Isabela**. He turned his energies to establishing a trading settlement where he hoped to sell cheap European goods to the natives in return for large quantities of **gold**, a new source of which was highly sought after in Europe.

Unfortunately for Columbus, gold had no real value for the Tainos and they proved singularly unwilling to exert much effort mining it. This meant he would have to set up a far more complicated operation to make the colony profitable, with the Tainos enslaved and forced to work the gold mines. But even before Columbus ventured off on his first slave-taking forays into the Cibao, La Isabela's settlers began dying in the hundreds from **malaria and yellow fever**. Panic and dissent swept through the colony and a petty noble took the opportunity to hijack one of the ships with a half-dozen others and headed back to Spain to complain of his treatment. Columbus returned to Spain in 1496 to defend himself against these charges, leaving his brother Bartolomé in charge of the colony. Bartolomé had even less control over the colonists and a revolt erupted. The rebel colonists abandoned La Isabela and Bartolomé and the few remaining loyal settlers moved to establish a new outpost at **Santo Domingo**. Columbus returned in 1498, but the Spanish settlers refused to obey his orders because they considered him a foreigner. Reports of unrest filtered back to the Spanish court and in 1500 bureaucrat **Francisco Bobadilla** was sent to the new colony to investigate the civil strife. Bobadilla quickly appointed himself the new governor and sent Columbus back to Spain in chains.

Genocide and gold

Spain's King Fernando replaced Bobadilla in 1501 with **Nicolás de Ovando**, a seasoned administrator of conquered Muslim lands in Andalucía, with instructions to impose order on the ever-unruly colony. Ovando instigated the monumental construction work that was to turn Santo Domingo into Spain's capital in the New World and expanded Columbus's system of **Taino slavery**. To this end, he waged several campaigns of conquest against the country's five large *caciques* – local communities responsible for great swathes of land – executing the leaders and herding the rest into the mines. At this time, the **Catholic Church** was at the height of its power and was looking towards the New World for expansion opportunities; the Vatican thus decided to turn Santo Domingo into a regional base for Christianity, sending successive waves of missionaries to construct a cathedral, several churches, monasteries and convents from which priests would depart to the American mainland and **proselytize**. For their part the colonists were eager to soften their enslavement of the local population with a veneer of piety and set up a new system, called **encomienda**, by which the Tainos' souls would ostensibly be saved in return for their slave labour. The Taino population quickly dwindled over the next twenty years. By 1514 only 11,000 remained in Spanish control out of a number once estimated at between 500,000 and two million.

To make up for the steep decline in the number of Tainos, the Spaniards embarked in 1505 on their first **slaving expeditions** in the Antilles and along the coast of Central America. Some entrepreneurs set up small forts from which regular forays could be made into the interior, thus laying the foundations for future Spanish colonies, such as Ponce de León in Puerto Rico and Juan de Esquival in Jamaica. Meanwhile, the Columbus family's tireless petitioning of the Spanish court for the return of their rights to the New World at last brought success and Christopher's son **Diego Columbus** was appointed Ovando's successor in 1509. Diego began by immediately reapportioning most of the enslaved Tainos to himself and a few allies. This caused uproar among the colonists and King Fernando was forced to appoint the **Real Audencia**, a royal court of appeals that would check the governor's power; the Audencia did serve to control Diego's abuses and by the 1520s it had been taken over by corrupt local sugar barons who used it mainly to collect graft. The king also promulgated a series of laws that ordered the colonists to pay the Tainos fair wages for their labour and give them decent housing, but the decrees were ignored.

Back in Spain, a conquistador-turned-priest named **Bartolomé de las Casas** had been petitioning the court on behalf of the Tainos for several years, with limited success. When, in 1514, Fernando died and Cardinal Cisneros was appointed regent, Las Casas found he had a powerful new ally. One of the cardinal's first acts was to send Las Casas and three Jeronymite priests to Santo Domingo along with a squadron of troops, instructing them to free the Tainos and **resettle** them in several new *caciques*. However, as soon as the Tainos had been moved to their new homes, a smallpox epidemic broke out – brought over by the Europeans – killing all but 3000 of the remaining 11,000 enslaved natives. The Jeronymites took this as a divine signal that the Tainos should never have been freed and sent the survivors to work in the new sugar mills that were being built around Santo Domingo. Las Casas, though, continued to petition on behalf of the Tainos; in 1515 the cardinal accepted las Casas' suggestion that the sugar mills substitute **African slave labour**, which was used successfully in Portugal's West African colonies, setting in motion the African slave trade that was to dominate the New World economy for the next four centuries.

Sugar, slaves and pirates

As the gold economy ground to a halt, sugar swiftly filled the gap as the island's primary source of income. Numerous rural **sugar mills** sprouted up in the 1520s, leading to an exponential increase in the importation of slaves. The mill owners quickly formed a new colonial upper class and increased Spain's earnings on the island a hundredfold. Less wealthy colonists were forced to subsist by hunting the herds of wild livestock that roamed throughout the island, descended from the cattle brought over by Columbus and Ovando. Meanwhile, the several hundred remaining Tainos came together under the banner of a bandit named **Enriquillo** in 1526 and took to raiding the plantations from their base in the Sierra Bahoruco. As a matter of policy they would free any slaves they discovered, who joined the growing bands of escaped African slaves known as **cimarrones** – literally, "wild animals" – who were colonizing the island's nearly impassable mountain ranges. *Cimarrón* ranks expanded to such an extent that by the 1530s the Spaniards would only travel outside their plantations in large, armed groups.

The Spaniards also began to run into trouble with **piracy** in the 1540s. For most of the sixteenth century, Spain was at war with both the British and the Dutch and as part of their tactics these nations commissioned **privateers** – royally sanctioned and funded pirates – to infest Caribbean waters, boarding stray Spanish ships and absconding with their cargo, or raiding and torching isolated plantations. Havana was subsequently chosen by the Spanish as the designated stopping point between Spain and the silver mines of Mexico and Peru. Ships headed for Santo Domingo or Puerto Plata had to break off from the fleet upon arrival in the Caribbean and brave the pirate-choked waters alone, which discouraged most merchants from doing business here. Aside from Santo Domingo, which managed to maintain some legal exports, Dominican ports were forced to rely on **contraband** trade with foreigners. By the 1550s this was the sole engine of the local economy.

Colonial decline and French encroachment

After fifty years of futile attempts to force towns along the northern and western coasts of Hispaniola to cease their contraband trade, the Crown decided to wipe them out. In 1605 Governor Antonio de Osorio was ordered to burn the colony's outer towns to the ground and forcibly resettle their residents in the countryside surrounding Santo Domingo. This disastrous action, known ever since as the **devastaciones**, permanently crippled the island's economy.

French and British adventurers took advantage of Spain's sudden retreat into a corner of Hispaniola to colonize the island of **Tortuga**, just off the northwestern coast, in 1629. Despite periodic Spanish raids, the new colony, whose inhabitants survived by pirating, growing tobacco and buccaneering (the hunting of wild livestock on Hispaniola), continued to prosper.

In 1640 the **French** kicked the British out and organized the notoriously unruly outpost into an official colony, from which they expanded onto the northern coast of present-day Haiti. Years of ferocious cat-and-mouse fighting ensued between the two remaining powers until, in 1697, the **Treaty of Ryswyck** was signed, establishing the borders as they are today at the north and south coasts, but leaving open the question of rights to the interior as a large chunk of it continued to be claimed by both countries. The French were gradually outdoing the Spaniards, however and by 1725 French colony **St-Domingue** (modern-day Haiti) had become the most prosperous colony in the Caribbean.

The Haitian revolution and occupation

French St-Domingue's unparalleled commercial success relied entirely on the mass importation of African slaves – during the eighteenth century slaves outnumbered Europeans and mulattos by more than ten to one. This unstable situation was made worse by the persecution by whites of the growing **mulatto** class. As the mulattos began arming themselves in the eighteenth century in order to win rights back that were increasingly taken away from them, the **white planters** meanwhile fashioned themselves as democrats in the style of Thomas Jefferson and plotted a revolution in which they would continue the slave system but end the burdensome tax demands of France. Of course, **African slaves** had the most to complain about, being forced to work twenty-hour days of backbreaking labour and subjected to all manner of hideous tortures and abuses.

On August 14, 1791, a Voodoo priest named **Boukman** held a secret convocation of hundreds of slaves from plantations across the colony, declared the independence of the new black republic called "**Haiti**" – the Taino word for the island – and sparked a colony-wide revolution in which half of the plantations were burned to the ground within three months. Boukman was killed in the initial fighting, but **Touissant L'Ouverture**, a black slave who had served in the colony's French militia, quickly took over leadership of the revolt, which led to three decades of intense military activity along the Dominican border.

Spain saw the revolt as a perfect opportunity to gain control of the entire island. By promising freedom to all St-Domingue's slaves, they won the allegiance of L'Ouverture and his troops and soon conquered much of France's inland territory; after the bloody defeat of the British, they seemed set to take over the rest of the island. However, when the French responded by freeing the slaves, Touissant abruptly switched sides and his army forced Spain back to its old borders. In 1800 Napoleon rescinded the emancipation, provoking Touissant into declaring independence, formally setting up a Haitian constitution and government, and invading the Spanish colony to protect his eastern flank. This was the first of several invasions that would set the tone for Dominican attitudes toward Haitians into the twenty-first century. They included a 23-year occupation starting in 1821 during which the slaves were freed and major, highly chaotic land redistribution took place.

In the context of the unrest caused by the Haitian occupation, a number of white intellectuals in Santo Domingo formed the **Trinitarian movement** in 1838 under the leadership of **Juan Pablo Duarte**, a merchant whose business had been ruined by Haitian reforms. The Trinitarians plotted with dissatisfied Haitian army officers, wealthy mahogany exporter **Buenaventura Báez** and rich cattle rancher **Pedro Santana** in coordinating a **military coup** in February 1843.

For the rest of the nineteenth century the new Dominican state would be plagued by incessant internal strife. This was the era of the **caudillos**, strongmen based in every region of the country who commanded large armies of local peasants and who were usually far more interested in lining their own pockets than running the country. In large part, *caudillo* power was made possible by the constant fear of **Haitian invasions**, which occurred periodically and necessitated large armies to repel them. Once the Haitian army was dealt with, the *caudillo* forces would generally march on Santo Domingo and place their leader in power, a pattern that began at the very outset of Dominican independence. Both Báez and Santana were venal and corrupt and collectively flushed the Dominican economy down the toilet. In 1861 Santana went as far as betraying the country by selling it back to Spain in exchange for a large sum of money.

Spanish annexation and the Restoration

Under the terms of the **Spanish annexation**, finalized in 1861, General Santana retained military command of the new Spanish province but it quickly became apparent that the Spaniards planned to remove him from power; he had been deposed by mid-1862. The new Spanish authorities managed to efficiently alienate the Dominican populace through **discrimination** against the mulatto majority, who were constantly reminded that they would have been slaves in the neighbouring Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Having had their rights gradually eroded for two years, several hundred Dominicans rebelled at Santiago in February 1863, initiating the **War of Restoration**. Spanish soldiers marched on the city and dispersed the rebels quickly, but most fled into the mountains along the border – under the protection of the Haitian government – and engaged in **guerrilla raids** on Spanish targets. In August of the same year, the rebels launched an offensive and took control of the Cibao, burning Santiago to the ground in September in order to supplant the Spanish troops there. The Spaniards lost far more soldiers, though, to tropical disease; by the end of their occupation over 12,000 of their troops were dead from yellow fever. Realizing the futility of the war and not willing to sacrifice thousands more ground forces, the Spaniards began **negotiations** with the rebels, who were themselves in political disarray, and finally left unconditionally in July 1867.

Chaos and caudillos

The overthrow of Dominican rebel leaders during the War of Restoration presaged the most **chaotic period** in Dominican politics by far. By the time the

Spaniards departed, the main towns were in ruins and across the island dozens of *caudillos* were fighting among each other for power. Guerrilla general **José María Cabral**, for example, had control over most of Barahona and the southwest during the war, but was in a precarious position because he relied on financial support from Buenaventura Báez's old mahogany-exporting partners in Azua. In Santana's old stomping ground, the southeast, cattle rancher **Caesario Guillermo** had cobbled together a coalition of former *Santanistas* that gave him regional ascendancy, while wealthy Puerto Plata tobacco exporter **Gregorio Luperón** had a firm hold of the north coast. The rest of the nineteenth century featured a dizzying series of military coups that left the nation in tatters. By the time military strongman **Ulises Heureaux** was **assassinated** in Moca in 1899 by the Cibao tobacco merchants he had been begging for a loan, the country's debt was over 35 million pesos, fifteen times the annual budget – and all revenues were administered by an American company that was entitled to take one-third for themselves.

The American occupation

The twentieth century began with the election of two Cibao politicians who promised to end the cycle of *caudillismo*, president **Juan Isidro Jimenes** and vice-president **Horacio Vásquez**. This promise went unfulfilled, though, as by 1902 the two had fallen out over the division of patronage to their respective supporters and their personal rivalry, and that of their followers, dominated the next decade. As civil war between various permutations of *Jimenistas* and *Horacistas* raged on (and on and on), the United States had become increasingly concerned that this endemic chaos would harm their military interests. Of particular concern were the massive debts that had accrued to European banks and the fact that, since the start of the twentieth century, various European powers had been sending naval warships to Santo Domingo in an effort to intimidate the Dominican government into honouring its financial commitments. The Americans were increasingly active in their defence of the **Monroe Doctrine**, which gave them the self-ordained power to dominate the hemisphere without the interference of Europe and feared the Germans might use the Dominicans' failure to pay their debts as a pretext to invade and set up a naval base at Samaná. To preclude this they insinuated themselves further and further into the country's governance. When Cáceres was murdered by soldiers loyal to **Desiderio Arias**, a token *Jimenista* in the Cáceres cabinet, thereby launching the bloodiest period of civil war in the nation's history, the Americans sent a **Pacification Committee** to negotiate an end to the strife, nominating neutral Archbishop Alejandro Nouel to be the new president.

However, no sooner had the archbishop assumed office than Arias began another military coup that occupied the presidential offices. The Americans sent another commission suggesting the election of a *Horacista*, Congressman **José Bordas Valdez**, who was accepted by all parties as a temporary solution until democratic elections could be held. But Bordas quickly manoeuvred to stay in power, aligning with the *Jimenistas* and naming Arias his secretary of defence. When Bordas sold the Cibao railroad in 1913 to *Jimenista* interests, the *Horacistas* revolted, which brought yet another American commission that promised democratic elections in return for peace. Despite their assurances, the **January 1914 elections** were rigged by Bordas, who got a new million-dollar loan and kept the support of the increasingly intrusive Americans by agreeing to the direct US control of public expenditure.

Through his concessions to the Americans, Bordas alienated both Dominican parties and the *Jimenistas* and *Horacistas* combined in a new revolt to remove him from power. US President Woodrow Wilson responded in June 1914 with the **Wilson Plan**, which gave the Dominicans three months to end hostilities and choose a president, after which time the US Marines would intervene and impose a government on them. **Jimenes** beat Vásquez by a wide margin in the October elections and reinstated Arias as secretary of defence. From the start, he came into conflict with the Americans by refusing to recognize the American comptroller – who still controlled public expenditures – and rebuffed US demands that a **national police** be created under direct American command. The US meanwhile **occupied Haiti** in July 1915, with the implicit threat that the Dominican Republic might be next. The pretext came when Arias staged a military coup in April 1916. US Marines were sent into Santo Domingo to "protect the lives of resident foreigners"; by May they had taken control of the capital and were steadily expanding into the rest of the country. When a new government refused American demands in November, President Wilson announced a formal **military occupation**.

From 1916 through 1924 the **US Navy** administered the Dominican Republic from its base in Santo Domingo. While in power, the Americans reorganized the tax system, accounting and administration, built a new system of highways and improved primary education. They also allowed American products to flow into the country without taxation, censored the press, banned firearms and constructed a repressive **National Police Force** with which they battled and tortured various **guerrilla factions** that staged raids on US targets from the mountains. In the east, the highly organized **Gavilleros** bandits, operating in groups of thirty, harassed the invaders for the duration of their stay. Nevertheless, this was an economic boom time for the nation, largely due to the destruction of sugar beet farms in France during World War I, which led to skyrocketing sugar prices and produced the prosperous era known as the **Dance of Millions**, when old fishing villages like San Pedro and La Romana were transformed into more cosmopolitan port cities – though they were not to stay that way. In 1921 Warren Harding replaced Wilson as US president; having attacked Wilson during the campaign for the continued, in his view immoral, American presence in Hispaniola, Harding demanded a quick withdrawal from the island upon taking office. The Americans' initial demands to keep control of the National Police were refused and they left in 1924 with only customs still under their control.

The Trujillo era

The most devastating consequence of the US occupation was the formation of a National Police trained in the repressive techniques of an occupying force. The Americans had thought that this would end the power of the *caudillos*, but the new order produced instead a super-*caudillo*, **Rafael Leonidas Trujillo**, who was to maintain totalitarian control over the Dominican Republic for three decades. When the Americans left, Horacio Vásquez became the new Dominican president and appointed Trujillo chief of the National Police in recognition of his loyalty. In 1930, though, with Vásquez desperately ill, Trujillo staged a military coup that forced his former boss from the country. Sham elections were held later that year: Trujillo's police shot several other candidates and broke up all opposition rallies and the vote was rigged to ensure his success.

Over the next 31 years, Trujillo transformed the entire country into his **personal corporation** and appointed family members to the highest positions in the government. He operated monopolies in sugar, salt, rice, beef, milk, cement,

Operación Perejil

The genocide began on the night of October 3, 1937, when hundreds of soldiers ambushed a religious procession outside Bánica and killed several hundred Haitians who had crossed the border to worship. For the next two months soldiers singled out and murdered as many Haitians as they could identify living in the Dominican Republic. The police separated out the Haitians from the Dominicans by inducing them to say the word *perejil* ("parsley"), which native Kreyol-speakers tend not to be able to enunciate properly, lisping the letter "r". The captives were then sent to **"deportation" centres**, where they were processed (so that it seemed they had been deported), and subsequently taken out at night in small groups and hacked to death with machetes; their bodies were fed to the sharks in the Bahía de Manzanillo.

cigarettes and insurance; he deducted ten percent of all public employees' salaries (which ostensibly went to his political party); operated two large banks; and received a percentage of all prostitution revenues. By the end of his regime, he directly employed sixty percent of the Dominican workforce. To this end he transformed **Santo Domingo** from a mere administrative capital to the centre of the nation's industry, initiating the urban expansion that continues to this day.

Trujillo's regime was one of the most astonishingly intrusive and **oppressive** in Latin American history. All citizens were required to carry identification cards that identified them by number; if they couldn't provide the police with a good reason for why they were walking the streets at a certain time, they were arrested. Real and suspected political opponents were imprisoned, tortured and assassinated by the thousands. But his most horrific accomplishment was manifested in **Operación Perejil** in which between 20,000 and 25,000 Haitian peasants, who had been farming on the Dominican side of the border, were exterminated (see above).

Trujillo styled himself to be a major player on the international scene, if one with little to no consistency, professing admiration for Hitler while at the same time accepting thousands of German Jewish refugees during World War II; taking a strong anti-Communist stance during the Cold War; murdering exiled Dominican scholars who spoke out against his regime in the United States; and even attempting the assassination of Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt in 1959. For most of his rule, Trujillo was actively supported by the **United States** because of his professed anti-Communism. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's classic line describing American policy in Latin America during the Cold War was made in reference to Trujillo: "He may be an SOB, but he's *our* SOB." In the late 1950s, though, Cuba's Fidel Castro took an interest in overthrowing the dictator and concerns about a possible Communist takeover prompted the CIA to train a group of Dominican dissidents, who **assassinated** Trujillo in a dramatic car chase on the highway between Santo Domingo and San Cristóbal on May 30, 1961.

Fledgling democracy and American intervention

Upon Trujillo's death, Vice-President **Joaquín Balaguer** rose to power under the tutelage of the Trujillo family, who had responded to the dictator's murder with multiple arrests, tortures and murders of political opponents, both real and imagined. A series of new opposition political parties was formed despite this repression, most notably writer **Juan Bosch**'s Partido Revolucionario Dominicano

(PRD), which banded together with reform-minded military officers and threw the entire Trujillo family out of the country in 1961 – but not before the Trujillos absconded with over US$100 million of government money. The following year, Balaguer was forced into exile as well thanks to a nationwide strike that paralyzed the country for three months. **Democratic elections** were held in December of 1962, which were won in a landslide by Bosch. The PRD set out to re-establish **civil liberties**, ending the system of identification cards and lending funds to new, independent newspapers and radio stations. Bosch had few friends in the military, however (he had mistakenly been labelled a Communist) and in September 1963 a military junta deposed him. This military council was extremely unpopular and for the next two years the opposition parties of Bosch and Balaguer joined forces with a minority of the military officers. On April 24, 1965, the PRD's communications director, **José Francisco Peña Gómez**, announced over the radio that the revolution had begun and tens of thousands of people took to the streets in the capital. The **popular uprising** took control of the entire city and was preparing to launch a strike on the San Isidro Air Force Base east of the city – the military's last stronghold – when US President **Lyndon Johnson**, under the mistaken belief that the uprising was a Communist takeover that would create "another Cuba", sent 45,000 troops into the capital on April 28 and installed a temporary military junta composed of officers from San Isidro; the possibility of a more democratic, peaceful regime was therefore thwarted by American paranoia. A new election was called for June 1966, with Balaguer and Bosch the main candidates, but Balaguer's troops, a holdover from the Trujillo forces, assassinated and intimidated hundreds of PRD supporters and placed Bosch under house arrest. As a result, Balaguer won the election by a slim margin and was installed as president for the next twelve years.

The Balaguer era

Balaguer began his regime in 1966 by founding a secret police unit called **La Banda**, which carried out the assassination of hundreds of his political enemies under the auspices of an "anti-Communist" campaign and clamped down on newspaper and television stations that were critical of him. He did, however, continue the programme of **industrialization** begun under Trujillo, this time funded by foreign investment. Much of the government's budget was provided by assistance from USAID, the IMF and the World Bank; a sugar quota was established with the United States that insulated the sugar mills somewhat from world price fluctuations; and plans to turn the country into a centre for tourism were developed. Political opposition was restricted to PRD members, many of whom were in exile in the United States, including Bosch in New York City, who felt that the PRD had moved too far to the right and so formed a new party, the **Partido de la Liberación Dominicana** (**PLD**), leaving **Peña Gómez** to assume command of the PRD. By cultivating the endorsement of the rural peasants and urban poor throughout the 1970s, Peña Gómez became something of a national hero, though for a long while he was prevented from running for public office by La Banda's terrorist activities.

Despite Balaguer's violence against the citizenry and the widespread **corruption** of his government, he enjoyed US political and financial support until the election of **Jimmy Carter** in 1976. Under US pressure, La Banda was disbanded and elections were held in May 1978. On PRD presidential candidate **Antonio Guzmán**'s resounding victory, Balaguer's troops turned off all electricity throughout the country, stormed the election centre, beat the polling officers and burned many of the ballot boxes, declaring themselves the victors the next day. Carter refused to recognize the election and pressured the Organization of American States to follow suit. When it was clear that no further economic aid was coming and that the sugar quota was about to be suspended, Balaguer gave up and stood down in favour of Guzmán.

Guzmán fired Balaguer's cronies in the military and reinstated freedom of the press, but he also set about transforming himself into a new *caudillo*. His children, relatives and friends took all the country's key posts and millions of pesos were printed, wrecking the economy, so that he could hire hundreds of PRD members to newly created government jobs. Despite this attempt to buy them off, the PRD leadership denounced him for betraying the party's ideals and nominated **Salvador Jorge Blanco** for the next presidential election in 1982. Guzmán tried to convince the military to have Blanco assassinated before the election, but they would have none of it. When Blanco defeated Balaguer in the election and took office in May 1982, Guzmán became increasingly depressed and in July he committed suicide. Faced with the economic crisis created by his predecessor, Blanco was forced to negotiate an austerity package with the **International Monetary Fund** that cut salaries, raised prices and put restrictions on imports. So that he wouldn't be associated with these unpopular moves, Blanco initiated a propaganda campaign against the IMF even as he was negotiating a deal with them. This proved to be a fatal blunder, for when he implemented the Fund's reforms in April 1984, a massive three-day riot broke out in the capital that was quelled only after the army had killed dozens of protesters. Once implemented, though, the reforms worked, stimulating agriculture, strengthening the peso and creating growth. The unpopularity of the package nevertheless carried serious political consquences and Balaguer forced Blanco out of office in the election of 1986.

Balaguer's first priority was the **persecution of Blanco** so that he would never challenge for the presidency again. For an entire year, Balaguer staged weekly television broadcasts in which he denounced Blanco's administration as thoroughly corrupt and tore apart the former president's reputation. Blanco remained silent under the weight of these attacks and before long public opinion was firmly against him. He was finally arrested and imprisoned in April 1987, upon which he had a heart attack and was released for medical treatment in the United States. Though he was tried in absentia, found guilty and sentenced to 25 years, in the early 1990s he returned to the country and appealed the decision – Balaguer dropped the case in exchange for Blanco's promise to never enter politics again.

On the economic front, Balaguer dedicated himself to the total **reversal of the IMF austerity plan**. He set the official rate of exchange between pesos and US dollars at a ridiculously high rate, forbade public transactions in foreign currency and forced all businesses and tourists to convert their hard currency at the government's Central Bank at the artificial exchange rate. He also printed millions of new pesos without backing, a move that resulted in high inflation and an economic recession. In 1989 Balaguer exacerbated his problems by refusing to pay back the country's debts to foreign banks. Credit was cut off and exports – including medicine, electricity and oil – were shut down, creating the worst economic crisis of the century. Regardless, Balaguer managed to edge Bosch and Peña Gómez out in the **election of 1990**, though each got approximately a third of the vote, through a fraud that took thousands of Peña Gómez's rural supporters off the rolls and a virulent campaign that depicted Bosch as a corrupt Communist and Peña Gómez as a Voodoo priest.

Recession and power blackouts dominated the next four years, though Balaguer heaped hundreds of millions of dollars on extravagances like El Faro (see p.74) and the Gran Teatro del Cibao (see p.220). His popularity had waned to such an extent by the **election of 1994** that his only hope was a systematic, nationwide vote fraud. The same tired faces reappeared for this presidential contest: 84-year-old Balaguer, 82-year-old Bosch and 74-year-old Peña Gómez. Of these, only Peña Gómez generated much enthusiasm from his traditional constituency and all the polls had him ahead by a wide margin. But in his usual fashion Balaguer managed to destroy tens of thousands of his opponents' votes after a count that took three months to complete. Election monitors led by former US President Carter documented hundreds of irreglarities by Balaguer supporters and to quell another **nationwide strike**, Balaguer agreed to reduce his new term to two years.

Hurricane Hipólito

Peña Gómez was the only one of the three latter-day *caudillos* to take part in the 1996 election: Balaguer didn't run as part of his 1994 deal and Bosch decided to make way for his young protégé **Leonel Fernández**, who edged Peña Gómez by a few thousand votes. The **rapid growth in tourism** and the end of Balaguer's restrictions on hard currency helped pull the country out of its decade-long recession and Fernández's first term in office is remembered for giving the Dominican Republic the fastest-growing economy in the entire hemisphere for four straight years, though little actual legislation changed with the turnover in power thanks to a strong majority for Balaguer's party, the PRSC, in both houses of Congress.

The 1998 **local and congressional campaigns** were the freest in the nation's history, with no restrictions on campaigns and rallies and with independent monitors to verify a lack of corruption in the vote count. Peña Gómez ran for mayor of Santo Domingo, but died of cancer a month before the vote. As a result, a tremendous wave of nostalgic fervour for the man who had championed the poor swept the country and his party, the PRD, took a **majority in Congress**. In 2000 the PRD built on this momentum when **Hipólito Mejia** was named the nation's president, succeeding Fernández.

The Mejia administration was an unmitigated financial disaster for the Dominican Republic. Abject incompetence in the handling of the Dominican economy led to a huge recession, near-constant blackouts and spiralling inflation that knocked two-thirds off the value of the Dominican peso. Job growth was nil and government debt climbed out of control as Mejia appointed tens of thousands of PRD political apparatchiks to unnecessary government jobs. Even worse, a massive bank scandal robbed the Dominican economy of billions of dollars. **Hipólito**, as Mejia is unaffectionately known, was voted out by a landslide in 2004, in favour of a resurgent Fernández, who was able to bring government spending under control and begin work to stabilize the peso.

The Dominican Republic today

Fernández was re-elected in 2008, which was a testament to the kudos he had earned, both at home and internationally, for his handling of the economy. Inflation, which once threatened to spiral out of control, has largely been tamed and the government's budget seeks to build out infrastructure in a big way, including an ambitious new programme to build a subway system in Santo Domingo and its outlying barrios, the first leg of which is already complete.

Despite the recent economic growth, glaring **social inequities** remain entrenched – and the jobs being created often don't pay enough to pull workers above the poverty line. The good news is that the **sugar monoculture** that existed for most of the twentieth century is slowly being replaced by a broader economy based on tourism, agriculture and industrial piecework, the last a result of the tax-free **industrial "free" zones** that have been instituted across the island. These sectors cover land set aside for the construction of factories where the minimum wage is suspended and companies don't have to pay taxes to the Dominican government. The reality of this isn't great for most workers, although the zones have made for a marked increase in wage labour for **women**.

All-inclusive tourism constitutes an even bigger chunk of the economy but, as with the free zones, wages are low and hours long. Another downside is that government officials often seem unconcerned about the **environmental damage** that many resorts inflict on coastal mangroves and the wildlife habitat.

Money also comes from the hard currency poured into the economy by the million-strong **Dominican–American immigrant community** in New York City, which sends more than a billion dollars annually to relatives back home.

Environment and wildlife

The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern half of the most **ecologically diverse** island in the Caribbean, one that features more than six thousand indigenous flowering plants, a vast array of birdlife and ecosystems ranging from arid desert and tropical rainforest to dense mangrove swamps and towering, pine-covered mountain ranges. Much of this flora and fauna is found exclusively in the DR and nearly all is fairly easy to see – you'll find a wealth of tours focused purely on getting close to nature.

Specific highlights include: the **humpback whale nursing and mating grounds** in the Bahía de Samaná and within the Silver Banks Marine Sanctuary just north of the Samaná Peninsula; the mammoth **mangrove swamps** of Parque Nacional Los Haitises along the southern end of the Bahía de Samaná; the tall **pine forests** – interspersed with ribbons of deciduous cloudforest – and wilderness hiking trails of the sky-high Cordillera Central mountains; the thousands of flamingos and other tropical birds present around the Dominican Republic's many **lagoons**, especially Lago Enriquillo, where you'll also find American crocodiles and rhinoceros iguanas; the arid **desert** plains of both the southwestern and northwestern sections of the country and their diverse collection of cacti; the **virgin rainforest** in sections of the Sierra Neiba and Bahoruco mountain ranges in the southwest; the many large **cave systems** carved from porous limestone rock throughout the country; and the intact **coral reefs** along the far northwest coast, inhabited by brilliantly coloured fish.

Geography and climate

The four **mountain ranges** that bisect the entire island allow for a series of fairly isolated ecosystems, each with their individual flora and fauna. The **trade winds** bring a lot of rain to the windward (northeastern) half of the mountains, which themselves cast vast rain shadows over the leeward (southwestern) ends. As a result the northern and eastern ends of the mountain ranges tend to be more densely vegetated, with lots of tropical rainforest, cloudforest and pine forest, while the southern and western sides are often semi-arid.

The **Cordillera Septentrional** along the country's north separates off a valley ribbon along the coastline from the larger Cibao valley and is itself dominated by a mix of tropical rainforest and evergreen forest. Stretching from Monte Cristi to Nagua, where after a brief trough it continues on as the Cordillera Samaná on the Samaná Peninsula, along its northern side it gets a tremendous amount of precipitation, before dropping precipitously down into the Cibao along its southern ridge.

The fertile **Cibao valley** has four separate ecological regions, including the humid agricultural plains of Haiti's **Plaine du Nord**, which once provided France with much of its colonial wealth; the desert region of the **Yaque river basin**, which begins on the Haitian side of the border and extends through Monte Cristi towards Santiago; the broad and phenomenally fertile savannah known as the **Vega Real** that stretches east of the Cordillera Central within the triangle of Santiago, La Vega and San Francisco de Macorís; and the often impassable stretches of swamp and wetland within the enormous **Yuna river basin**, which borders the Bahía de Samaná from the southwest.

By far the most massive of the island's mountain ranges – indeed the biggest in the Caribbean – is the **Cordillera Central**, which takes up a third of the island's mass, including a broad section of the DR's centre, before continuing through Haiti as the **Massif Central** and then ploughing underwater to Cuba and Honduras. These are extremely steep, craggy mountains that climb to a height of more than three thousand metres and are often covered with pine forests, some of them still virgin. They also serve as the DR's primary water source, with a dozen different **rivers** spiralling outward from the range to fertilize the valleys that surround them; these rivers have also been dammed in recent decades to provide the energy-poor nation with hydroelectricity. Interspersed throughout are several small alpine valleys that have been cultivated to varying degrees, on a large scale in the circular **Constanza valley** and by subsistence farmers in the smaller Tétero and Bao valleys that you'll find further west. After a brief trough along today's Autopista Duarte, the mountains continue into the nation's southeast as the **Cordillera Oriental**, though here they're somewhat smaller, more humid and dominated by palm forest. South of the Cordillera Oriental is the **Santo Domingo Valley**, which encompasses not only the capital but the vast sugar-growing region to the east and the arid territory that stretches west of it.

South of the Cordillera Central lies the **San Juan valley**, which stretches into Haiti as the Plaine Centrale, shielded from most of the rain by the mountains just north of it and thus semi-arid. It's traditionally been used for cattle grazing, but does feature some irrigated agriculture. The northern face of the **Sierra Neiba** that borders the San Juan valley to the south manages to soak up a good bit of precipitation though, and along the Haitian border where it's least developed you'll find the most extensive virgin rainforest left on the island. This is the end of the line for most of the rain, though; along its leeward slopes the range is parched limestone terrain and the **Neiba valley** that lies further south is flat, unrelenting desert, the least hospitable climate on the island, until you near the city of Barahona where the Río Yaque del Sur fertilizes land used for sugar cane plantations.

The **Sierra Bahoruco** that lies south of the Neiba valley is the second largest of the island's ranges, stretching west through Haiti where it's known as the **Massif du Sud** and encompasses the most diverse mix of mountain environments of the ranges. Along the eastern half, where the semiprecious stone larimar is mined, you'll find that rainforest predominates, while further west is an enormous pine forest and, beyond that, a mixture of deciduous forest and rainforest along the northern half and semi-arid, deforested farmland along the southern half. South of these mountains is the scrub- and cactus-dominated desert of the **Jaragua Peninsula**, which is seasonal home to hundreds of migratory bird species and has some of the island's best beaches.

As with the rest of the Caribbean, temperatures don't vary much over the course of the year, though the **rainy season** runs from May to mid-November. Not all heavy rains are concentrated into these months; you can often get two weeks of unbroken sunshine in the summer and torrential downpours in January. **Hurricane season** (July to mid-Oct) is a more serious concern, as a major one blasts the island every decade or so. In 1998 Hurricane Georges did extensive damage to the year's crops, wreaked havoc on buildings along the southern coast and swept away several small villages in the southwestern part of the country.

Flora

Long-term **deforestation** from both commercial timbering and slash-and-burn subsistence agriculture has taken its toll on the Dominican Republic's once extensive forests, but several reforestation projects in parts of the Cordillera Central are beginning to repair some of the damage. Those willing to head a bit off the beaten path will still be able to find a wide variety of forest types within the DR, a small handful of them intact virgin ecosystems. The mountain ranges still contain hundreds of square kilometres of pine forest, along with scattered cloudforests, a few stretches of rainforest and dry forest mixing deciduous with ferns, palms and pines. At lower altitudes you'll find everything from mangrove swamps and wetlands to grassy, cultivated savannahs, arid deserts, and vast tracts of irrigated land denuded of its original vegetation and given over entirely to sugar cane.

Trees and shrubs

The DR is home to a wide array of **trees**, many of them endemic. Of special import to the local economy have been the precious woods that have been logged for centuries, particularly the **Hispaniolan mahogany**, which can still be seen in parts of the Cordillera Central, Sierra Bahoruco and Parque Nacional del Este. **Calabash** was used for gourds first by the Tainos and later by colonial *cimarrones* and today's rural farmers, while the **piñon**, known to the outside world as Mother-of-Cocoa, takes on enormous significance both practical and religious. Known for its miraculous ability to grow back from a single branch, it is used by farmers for fencing off their land and for an easily replenished source of firewood. Meanwhile, it holds mystical significance for devotees of Dominican *Vodú*, in part because it "bleeds" red sap during the weeks leading up to Semana Santa. The sap is also a powerful poison used in local folk medicines and branches of the tree are used as staffs by rural faith healers.

The dominant tree in the pine forests, meanwhile, is the **Creolean pine**, another endemic species. Cedars, copeys, myrtle, laurel, cherry, wild sumac, juniper, walnut and cashew trees also proliferate in the mountains, whereas the deserts are dominated by a profusion of acacias, copeys, gumbo-limbos, frangipanis, mesquite, lignum vitae, poisonwood and sage. The deserts are also home to several varieties of cacti, some of them quite beautiful – particularly the **prickly pear cactus**, known locally as "Tuna", bearing beautiful white flowers and a fruit that's consumed raw by denizens of the Dominican Republic's southwest.

Of the sixty different types of palm tree spread across the island – most densely along the Samaná Peninsula – the graceful **Hispaniolan royal palm** is one of only a few thought to be indigenous; climbing to twenty metres or more in height, its leaves are used for rural roofing, the trunk for walls and the nuts for feeding livestock. The tightly bunched leaves of the **Hispaniolan hat palm** convey the illusion of a dark-green, frazzled wig high atop their fifteen-metre or higher trunks and are found most plentifully around Punta Cana. The classic **coconut palm** can be found there as well and along the beaches of Samaná; every part of their fruit is used for something or other, be it food or floor mats. On other parts of the Dominican coast you'll see lots of **sea grape**, a small gnarled tree with fan-shaped leaves, named for the extremely sour fruit that hangs from its branches; or the swamp-dwelling **gri gri** that are remarkably resistant to tropical storms and hurricanes and can be found along the island's lagoons and mangrove estuaries. Even more prevalent are **red mangroves**, though you'll also find **button mangroves** in the Bahía de Manzanillo and **white mangroves** in Parque Nacional Los Haitises. All the mangroves are central to the health of coastal ecosystems, affording protection from hurricane surges and providing a protected nursery for an array of sea creatures and birds.

Flowers

Flower farming and export is becoming a major business in the DR, largely because of the wide array of beautiful **tropical flowers** that are endemic here, including four hundred different types of **orchid**, over half of which grow in the

Sierra Bahoruco. Also found throughout the island in abundance are **heliconias** and **bromeliads**, while **bougainvillea** can be seen along the coast west of Barahona, **hortensias** in the area surrounding Bonao, **frangipani** in the arid regions and **roses** in the flower farms of Constanza.

Fauna

Though not as diverse as the vegetation on the island, thanks in part to the number of species that have become **extinct** since humans have settled on Hispaniola, the animal kingdom in the Dominican Republic still has a colourful and vital presence, if often confined to habitats that are, out of necessity, cordoned off for preservation and run by the national government.

Marine life

Much of the **coral reef** – astonishingly complex ecosystems that support diverse marine life, from various algae to tiny crabs and eels, not to mention brilliantly coloured coral itself – that once ringed the entire island of Hispaniola has been destroyed by pollution, development and the careless practice of some subsistence fishermen, who make a habit of dropping anchor over the reef when they fish. The only place where you'll find a substantial stretch of intact reef – with an accompanying spectacular array of colourful sea life – is along the **northern coast west of Luperón**. Here in the reefs live a broad array of tropical fish, anemones, sponges and the like. Smaller, but quite beautiful, sections of the original reef survive at the eastern tip of the Samaná Peninsula, around islas Saona and Catalina in the Parque Nacional del Este and at some points surrounding Parque Nacional Jaragua. Forty kilometres further out from the island's north coast, the rocky shelf that supports the island gives way abruptly to the 9000-metre **Brownson Trough**, one of the deepest underwater pits in the world and entirely unexplored. Along the edge of the trough north of the Samaná Peninsula sits another, largely unspoiled reef, protected by the Dominican government as the **Silver Banks Marine Sanctuary**, which also serves as feeding ground for large schools of dolphin and big fish and winter mating ground for thousands of humpback whales.

The **whales** are the single most spectacular marine animal inhabiting the surrounding waters and if you're not up for a week-long boat excursion to Silver Banks, you'll find plenty of day-trip boats to take you out to see them in the Bahía de Samaná every January and February. Other marine mammal life close to Dominican shores includes the highly endangered **manatee**, a famously gentle relative of the seal that ancient mariners may have mistaken for mermaids. More commercial species include **big fish** like marlin, swordfish, sea bass, snapper, mackerel, tuna and kingfish and **crustaceans** such as spiny lobsters, shrimp, crabs and sea urchins – the latter are shipped off en masse to Japan's restaurants.

Amphibians, reptiles and insects

Large **reptiles** are among the DR's most spectacular wildlife species, especially the **American crocodiles**, which grow up to nearly 5m in length and inhabit Lago Enriquillo, Parque Nacional Monte Cristi and Laguna Gri-Gri, as well as the saltwater Étang Saumatre just across the border in Haiti. Also evident in Lago Enriquillo, the northwest and the southwest are **rhinoceros iguanas**, which grow to 2m in length – at Isla Cabritos in Lago Enriquillo they are tame enough to feed and have begun to prefer sweet cakes over the cactus flower that was once their native food. A variety of smaller **lizards** inhabit virtually every corner of the island, including the **world's smallest reptile**, *Sphaerodactylus ariasae*, a miniature gecko discovered on Alto Velo in the nation's southwest that stretches a mere 1.6 centimetres in length.

The tens of thousands of enormous **sea turtles** that laid their eggs on Hispaniolan shores during the time of Columbus are mostly a thing of the past, but some can still be found in the islands called Los Siete Hermanos outside Monte Cristi, along Playa Limón just east of Miches, and in parques nacionales Jaragua and del Este, along with Isla Tortuga off the northern coast of Haiti. Unfortunately, local hunting threatens to drive them to total extinction; turtle meat is used in soups, intact shells can fetch a high price and bits of shells are sometimes used as protective covers for roosters' claws in cockfights. The largest of the sea turtles is the appropriately named **leatherback**, which bears a thick, tough hide in place of a hard shell. Other species that inhabit the island are the **hawksbill**, extremely rare because its shell fetches such a high price on the black market; the stocky, small-headed **loggerhead**; and the vegetarian **green turtles** that lay their eggs en masse along the shores of Los Siete Hermanos. Tiny freshwater **slider turtles** can be found in the Laguna Cabral just north of Barahona. Further inland, the island is home to a number of small **tree frogs**, including – in a small zone of the Cordillera Central right around Pico Duarte – the astonishingly loud **coqui frogs** that were once thought only to live on Puerto Rico.

Insect life is abundant throughout the DR but numbers and diversity reach their peak in the mangrove estuaries and lagoons, particularly Parque Nacional Los Haitises. The arid country west of Barahona, though, is the best place for **butterflies** and lepidopterists come to study the many varieties of swallowtail, monarch and flambeaus. Elsewhere, insect life makes itself known mainly through the variety of bites and sores incurred; **mosquitoes** are particular pests and can sometimes spread malaria and dengue fever, while **sand fleas** are a major problem along some of the island's beaches, particularly Punta Rucia, Playa Limón and Playa Monte Río.

Birds

Some three hundred **bird** species make the DR their year-round home, including 27 **endemic species**. The endemics are a major draw for independent tour expeditions – including one that recently drew former US president and life-long bird watcher Jimmy Carter to tour the Dominican outback. Among the endemics are the ridgeway hawk, narrow-billed tody, broad-billed tody, Hispaniolan parakeet, Hispaniolan parrot, Hispaniolan woodpecker, ashy-faced owl, black-crowned palm tanager, green-tailed warbler, white-necked crow, bay-breasted cuckoo and more. The **Southwest** is of special interest for birders, with four large lagoons, two offshore islands, the Jaragua Peninsula and the Sierra Bahoruco holding a near limitless spectrum of birdlife.

The DR's many **lagoons and mangrove estuaries** have the widest variety of birdlife on offer, inhabited not only by thousands of **flamingos**, the most ostentatiously beautiful of the lagoon birds, but also herons, egrets, ibises, roseate spoonbills, cuckoos, black-cowled orioles and village weavers, the last an African import. The **freshwater lagoons** are also inhabited by eleven varieties of duck, alongside rails, jacanas and grebes, while the **mangrove coasts** add a number of seafaring birds, especially the entertaining brown pelicans, boobies, frigate birds, cave swallows and terns. Predatory birds in these areas include the occasional osprey and peregrine falcon.

In the **mountains** you'll find some of the most interesting native birds, including the endemic **Hispaniolan woodpecker**, a menace to local trees – and thus despised by *campesinos* – along with narrow-billed todies, red-tailed hawks, white-necked crows, thrushes, tanagers and siskins. The rare **Hispaniolan parakeet**, known locally as the *perico*, dwells in the Cordillera Central and sections of the Neiba and Sierra Bahoruco, while the endemic **Hispaniolan emerald hummingbird** – which you'll often see along the Pico Duarte hiking trails – is still widespread in the Cordillera Central and is occasionally found elsewhere on the island. Many mountain-dwelling birds have recently been placed at risk due to changes in coffee-growing practices. As much of the original tree canopy of the mountain ranges was destroyed over the last century, migratory songbirds adapted by nesting in the shade overstories that were traditionally used by coffee growers. The increasing popularity of espresso beans has caused farmers to do away with shade cultivation in favour of an open-air method that produces a stronger coffee, destroying an important bird habitat. Happily, many of the **cooperative coffee plantations** that have recently sprung up around Jarabacoa stick to the old shade method, but species numbers are still plummeting.

Along the **open country** you'll find an enormous range of birds, though the most commonly espied are the **cattle egrets** that pick off insects stirred up by local herds and gather at dusk by the hundreds at a few select sites. Also around Bonao are the large **turkey vultures** that you'll see circling the countryside from high above; you may also catch a glimpse of the island's various warblers, honey-creepers, grackles, palmchats and terns. The yellow-black **village weavers** can be found seasonally in the western Cibao's rice fields, while caves, ruins and dense woodlands across the country are home to numerous **barn owls**. The **predatory birds** that dominate the flatlands are the endemic Ridgeway's hawk and the small, lizard-eating falcon known as the American kestrel. Today the **Hispaniolan parrot**, locally known as the *cottora*, is quite rare, its plumage all emerald but for a small spot of white on the forehead.

Land mammals

There are few **land mammals** in the Dominican Republic aside from pack animals and the dogs and rats brought over early on by the European colonists and still common denizens of city streets. Aside from a dozen different species of **bat**, which can be seen in the island's many caves, the only mammals native to the island are highly endangered and your only real hope of seeing them is at Santo Domingo's zoo. Of particular interest among these, the **solenodon** is a primitive nocturnal anteater with a comically long snout, the only insect-eating mammal native to the Caribbean, while the **hutia** is a one-foot-long, tree-climbing herbivore. Both also live in small numbers in parques nacionales del Este and Los Haitises.

Threats and restrictions

Much of this natural beauty is **under threat** from the ongoing effects of deforestation and development. The Dominican government has been working hard to protect what remains of its wilderness by creating a series of **national parks and scientific reserves**, but their limited resources mean that upkeep of these areas is often less than perfect. It is imperative for paying visitors to be responsible and endeavour to support the vital educational programmes that seek to preserve these remnants.

It should be stressed that not only is it irresponsible, it is also **illegal** to buy, even as souvenirs, most items that involve the use of wild animals or flowers in their production. This applies specifically to tortoiseshell, black coral, various species of butterfly, products made from crocodile skin and turtle shells. Trade in living animals, including tortoises, iguanas and parrots (often sold as nestlings) is also illegal. Mahogany once proliferated in Dominican forests but is now endangered. While the cutting of mahogany is restricted in the country today, the sale of mahogany products is still technically legal, though that shouldn't serve as encouragement to buy it.

Music: merengue, bachata and beyond

As its home turf, the Dominican Republic positively pulsates to the sound of **merengue**. It pours out of passing cars, thrums from boom boxes and blares from every storefront. And in the countless rural taverns and high-tech dance clubs that dot the island, merengue is the main item on every menu.

No wonder then that merengue's explosion onto the New York scene in the 1980s and ensuing dissemination across the globe is a source of intense pride for all Dominicans. The music is so closely identified with the local character that, for them, to love merengue is to love the island itself and the people who inhabit it. The 1970s icon **Johnny Ventura** has now returned home to become a major political figure. And multi-platinum Latin superstar **Juan Luís Guerra**'s conquest of the world, topping even the sales of crooner Julio Iglesias and winning multiple Latin Grammys in 2007, is an unparalleled national success story.

Certainly not all have caught the fever and public perception of merengue often involves the vision of Vegas-style performers lip-synching on a Spanish-language cable network. Let that not be your lasting vision, however; this ever-evolving musical style is just now coming into its own.

Roll call

As with all Afro-Caribbean genres, merengue is easily identified by its omnipresent **beat pattern**. When compared to salsa or calypso, the merengue pattern seems aggressively unsyncopated, its souped-up military rat-a-tat landing squarely on 1 and 3. But one of several interlocking patterns rattles through the rhythm section over this signature on-the-beat thump the way a city seethes around its neatly numbered grid.

The **instrumentation** is a blend of traditional rural orchestration with contemporary electronics and strong, salsa-influenced horn sections. **Saxophones** and **trumpets** are always present in contemporary bands, with a trombone occasionally added. The main purpose of the horns is to rip off a series of crisp, pyrotechnic riffs. The **bass** never strays far from thumbing out the underlying groove. The **piano** underlines the harmony with arpeggios and syncopated chord movement and is often electric. And that quintessential old-time instrument, the **accordion**, still makes an appearance in a few modern bands.

The **percussion section** is the backbone. The **congas** slap out a series of African beats that provide the primary fire and groove. The **tambora** is a two-headed lap drum that is anchored by a hand at one end and rapped with a stick at the other. Often a **bass drum** is used, an innovation that began as Dominican performers incorporated disco elements into their repertoire during the 1970s in order to stave off bankruptcy in the face of the Bee Gees. And always beneath its more ostentatious neighbours is the incessant scrape of the **güira** – traditionally fashioned from a kitchen utensil – a cultural inheritance of the Tainos who inhabited the island before Columbus, its tireless hoarse rasping like that of a dying man begging to be remembered.

Let us not forget those who skim the cream off this rich cross-cultural blend, getting most of the credit and all the wanton glances – the **singers**. The most traditional merengue voice is a reedy, nasal style that occasionally manages to be haunting amid the up-tempos. Guerra is the principal exponent today. But the more richly sonorous Latin tradition is evident as well, most notably in the work of Ventura, the Dominican answer to Elvis. Choruses tend to come in threes, engaging in extended call-and-response sections with the lead, which is swapped among them when there is no superstar. Meanwhile, they engage in virtuosic floor shows, dancing in split-second formations like the Temptations on speed and maintaining an impossibly fast hand-jive. Bandleaders engage in the proceedings to varying degrees. Ventura's hip-swivelling histrionics are on a par with the legendary James Brown, while trumpet great Wilfrido Vargas maintains a dignified distance from his chorus's erotic foreplay.

Double and triple entendres involving sexuality and politics are standard procedure in the **lyrics**, while direct polemics are eschewed in favour of irony. "Dominicans have a wry sense of humour," says Guerra. "Irony works better than heavy messages and it's more fun!" In his writing, a first-rate poetry emerges using surrealistic images culled from *campesino* life. More often, though, merengue is the language of escapism and its lyrics seek to banish the exhausting outside world.

The immaculate conception

There are many stories regarding the **origins of merengue**, most of them patently apocryphal. One tale dates its inception to the Dominican Revolution against Haiti in the early nineteenth century. A soldier named Tomas Torres abandoned his post during a critical battle that the Dominicans later won and the first merengue song was composed by the victors to mock poor Tomas's glaringly unpatriotic survival instinct.

The main purpose of this fabrication is to shield Dominican society from the unsavoury fact that it was probably transported from Haiti and owes a debt to the traditions of Africa as well as Europe – an acknowledgement most Dominicans couldn't bear to make. Nevertheless, a musical form called **mereng** with an alarmingly similar rhythmic structure developed in Haiti (then St-Domingue) during the eighteenth century among the landed mulatto classes. Until the colony's last years, Europeans and Africans were allowed to intermarry, permitting some of African heritage to attain a level of power and wealth, even while others were subjected to the worst plantation slavery system of them all. The Europeans brought with them an abiding love of contra dance – the primary ballroom genre throughout the colonial Caribbean. Mereng was a "danza" form infused with African rhythm and is, incidentally, still current in Haiti, in a slower and more lilting form.

Meanwhile, the European settlers of Santo Domingo were from an early date subject to chastisement by their priesthood for excessive fervour while dancing. Merengue first infiltrated the country through the pueblos, via Haitian invaders and former French gentry fleeing the machete after the revolution across the border, from whence it made its way to elite urban ballrooms. There it encountered entrenched resistance from prominent literary figures, largely on the basis of its "African-ness". Victims of the latest dance craze were likened to virgins who had soiled their good names. From that point, any bumpkin musician who happened to innocently offer a merengue during a high-society dance set could expect to have a revolver pointed at him.

Utterly taboo in the ballrooms, merengue was left to the auspices of rural Dominican folk. Partly because it was easy to dance, partly because the lyrics were irreverent and lewd, it completely took over amid the vast agricultural stretches of the Cibao valley in particular. The Cibao's central city Santiago became the focal point for *merengue típico cibaeño*, still considered the definitive form.

One final touch was needed to achieve the classic form and it came, oddly enough, via Germany. The country was an important business partner for the Dominican Republic during the latter half of the century, buying a great deal of the tobacco grown in the Cibao plantations. Many German exporters made a side business out of selling accordions, which quickly made inroads into the merengue ensemble, replacing the older string instruments. This generated huge concern for the survival of traditional merengue, partly because the first accordions in the country played only in one major key, rendering them inflexible and banishing all minor-key merengues to the dustbin of memory for a time.

Latin exodus

Merengue was finally completely adopted as the national Dominican music by all segments of society during the **isolationist regime of Trujillo** in the mid-twentieth century. Trujillo used it to emphasize his peasant roots and gain popularity with the masses and a number of major stars emerged from the era, including ballroom king **Luís Kalaff** and saxophonist **Tavito Vásquez**, often called the Dominican Charlie Parker. A top-notch big-band group would follow Trujillo around on campaign stops and state radio stations blasted favourite tunes between edicts. The entrenched antipathy of the urban elite began to melt as **El Jefe** started to frequent their salons, a pistol in his pocket and a song in his heart, causing a stately ballroom merengue to re-emerge.

For this and other offences, Trujillo was eventually assassinated. But once merengue was removed from the closet, there was no stopping it. The end of Trujillo's isolationist policies sparked a wave of migration to the major cities of North America, where Dominicans joined Puerto Ricans, Cubans and others in the vast urban barrios that served as cultural cauldrons from which modern Latin music fomented. Back home, Johnny Ventura was busy marketing his music to compete with the North American imports. Ventura was the first of the *merengueros* to fashion for himself a **pop icon status** similar to the ones being generated up north, using large-scale advertising, trademark floor shows and a sound more closely aligned with that of the American record industry. The end result for merengue was a sharp, stuttering momentum that the old style only hinted at.

The migration continued on an even greater scale in the 1980s due to a major recession. The increased Dominican presence in New York and Miami meant a much higher profile for the music. The resultant explosion onto the world music scene is still being felt, even as the impingement of outside influences on this previously insular style has forever transformed it.

Wilfrido Vargas was the top star of this golden era, pushing the music into uncharted harmonic and rhythmic territory. Vargas has always been an interesting mix of culture and commerce and his band had started out playing bossa novas and rock'n'roll because he thought it was the best way to make a buck. For a time he even featured disco covers, though it apparently caused him a certain degree of embarrassment. When it became financially viable for him to focus solely on merengue, he was much more open to outside elements than artists of the past, incorporating forms such as salsa, compa, zouk, reggae and recently even house music and rap into his own native idiom. His experiments initially met a certain amount of resistance from the purists, but his expansion of the vocabulary is now considered orthodoxy. Other big stars have followed suit, notably singing-great **Cuco Valoy**, whose passion is Cuban music and calypso given a political slant.

Bachata blitzkrieg

The explosion of outside influences on traditional Dominican music gave rise to the towering figure of the last two decades, **Juan Luís Guerra** and his band, **4:40**. Weaned on a mixture of traditional merengue and Western pop influences such as the Beatles and Manhattan Transfer, Guerra has contributed a vast amount to the music, injecting South African choruses and Zairian guitar work, slowing it down to a more lyrical level, infusing it with rich vocal harmonies and writing some of the most beautiful song lyrics ever conceived. "I studied literature in Santo Domingo," he says, "and the lyrics reflect my enthusiasm for poets like Neruda and Vallejo." Many of the songs, such as *I Hope it Rains Coffee in the Fields*, betray an affinity with magical realism: "[That] comes from an anonymous poem I found when I went to the city of Santiago de los Caballeros. It's probably the work of a *campesino* – a peasant – and it was such a beautiful metaphor, I had to develop it."

This sentiment conveys the spirit and conflict behind Guerra's phenomenally popular sound. For even as he incorporates an ever-widening menagerie of world music influences ("You look in Juan Luís' bag," says one collaborator, "and you see West African tapes, South African tapes, Indian music – he's listening to a whole different thing"), it is his urgent life's work to produce a populist music to which the people back home can relate. The high poetry of his lyrics focuses on Dominican images and issues, such as *The Cost of Living*, addressing long-term economic stagnation, and *Guavaberry*, an indigenous fruit that causes the skin to itch upon contact, and the outside musical colours he inserts function strictly in the service of Dominican music.

Guerra really blew the lid off the Latin music charts when he turned to a disreputable Dominican fusion of Cuban bolero and ranchero called **bachata**. Long popular with the Dominican underclasses, bachata began as a twangy rural guitar form performed by *campesinos* during outdoor parties and was transported to the bars and brothels of the desperately poor outer barrios around Santo Domingo during the mass urban migrations of the 1970s and 1980s. In part because of its social context, bachata – like its predecessor, merengue – was at first looked down on with extreme distaste by Dominican society and it was impossible to even purchase a bachata record in a mainstream music store. This allowed a handful of enterprising bottom-feeders like record producer Radhames Aracena and his **Radio Guarachita** a near-monopoly on the production and sales of bachata stars like **Leonardo Paniagua**, **Melida Rodríguez** and legendary guitarist and singer **Luís Segura** – whose records were hawked informally from outdoor stalls

Juan Luís Guerra – Ojalá que llueva café

Ojalá que llueva café	I hope it rains coffee in the fields
Ojalá que llueva café en el campo	that there falls a shower
que caiga un aguacero de yuca y té	of yuca and tea
del cielo una jarina de queso blanco	from the sky a tub of white cheese
y al sur, un montaña	and to the south, a mountain
de berro y miel	of butter and honey
oh, oh, oh, oh	oh, oh, oh, oh
Ojalá que llueva café	I hope it rains coffee in the fields

alongside fried snacks and split coconuts. The signature hit of this era was Segura's *Pena*, a typically doleful look at the pain of unrequited love that sold somewhere around 200,000 copies in 1983 – even though bachata was still banned from the record stores.

Guerra's upper-middle-class background is not that of the usual *bachatero*, but he was smart enough to see through the negative stereotypes associated locally with the music and turn out an entire album of bachatas on his legendary *Bachata Rosa*, giving them a slick, commercial production along with his trademark lyrics and vocals. The album went platinum across Latin America and was at the tops of the Latin charts in North America and Europe, instantly making him the biggest name in Dominican music and completely transforming the perception of bachata back in the home country. Many of the original *bachateros* resent Guerra's sudden co-opting of their musical form, but his success has resulted in new-found respect and fame for them as well. Segura and Paniagua – both now in their 60s – today sell more albums than they did in their youth and are in demand for concerts worldwide, while a new generation of bachata stars has arisen – pre-eminent of whom are **Luís Vargas** and **Raulín Rodriguez** – who haven't had to face the old social barriers.

Merengue mañana

Bachata's place in the Dominican musical landscape has been permanently enshrined; listen to Dominican radio today and you'll hear at least one bachata tune for every two merengues. Most bands today stick to one or the other, but a growing movement of young musicians like **Antony Santos** and **Teodoro Reyes** has fused the two into a new form – **bachatarengue** – which speeds up bachata's twangy guitar arpeggios and places them within merengue's up-tempo thump. The end result is a bit of a surprise – though the African roots of the two separate forms are not always obvious at first glance, bachatarengue sounds very much like Congolese soukous, an unintentional connecting of the fragmented strands of African music that survived in the Caribbean for five hundred years, bringing it back full-circle to its origin.

Another movement that has started to catch on – particularly in the Dominican barrios of New York and Boston – is **Dominican Roots**, a more conscious attempt to pay tribute to the African aspects of Dominican culture by a set of young musicians who grew up with the traditional *Vodú* music of the *campos* and outer barrios of Santo Domingo, then immigrated to the cities of the United States. Once in the States, many of these kids were shocked to find themselves considered "black" by their new society – which in turn sparked a renewed interest in the long-buried African influence on their home country. The grandfather of Dominican Roots music is **Luís Díaz**, whose 1970s ensemble Convite was part rock band and part ethnomusicological enterprise; they scoured the countryside learning about and recording the music that was played in villages across the island, then translated this folk music into a new rock-based idiom. But while Diáz's music attracted a sizeable cult following for twenty years, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that a slew of **emerging musicians** like Willian Alemán, Edis Sánchez, Tony Vicioso and the recently deceased Boni Raposo began setting up their own roots-based ensembles. The music that they've created varies wildly – from Raposo's straight-ahead *Vodú* drum-and-chorus lines to Sánchez's psychedelicizing of Dominican *gagá* music and Vicioso's massive ensembles combining *rara*, *palos* drums and electronics – but in all of their groups you can hear the

Discography

Compilations

- *Bachata Roja: Acoustic Bachata from the Cabaret Era* (IASO, US).

Classic acoustic bachata recordings that display the virtuosity of guitar work and lyric genius of local legends like Blas Duran, Leonardo Paniagua and Augusto Santos.

- *Grandes Soneros: 100% Dominicanos* (Camaleón, US).

Rare recordings of the Dominican Republic's great stars in the field of Cuban son – an absolute must for any Latin music lover's collection. Includes cuts from little-known but top-notch *soneros* who frequent the dark, dicey son clubs of Santo Domingo, like Santiago Cerón, Cuco Valoy, Manolé and Los Hijos del Rey.

Artists

Xiomara Fortuna

This woman is a true national treasure, though she's gotten more recognition in Europe and North America than in her home country.

- *Kumbajei* (Circular Moves).

Heavily influenced by contemporary West African pop, this album is filled with iconoclastic renderings of various traditional Dominican rhythms – which in her hands are utterly transformed into a new pop style.

Fulanito

By far the best of the merenhouse bands and with a huge following across Latin America.

- *El Hombre Mas Famosa de la Tierra* (Cutting Records).

Well, humble they're not – as the album cover proves – but they do a terrific job of tearing accordion merengue into the twenty-first century, with heavily sampled accordion, tambora and *güira* behind rapid-fire rap lines and heavy-handed hip-hop production.

Juan Luís Guerra

Juan Luís Guerra and his band 4:40 have cut a swath through the field of Latin American popular music with their brand of magical-realist merengue fused with discreetly erotic lyrics and mildly critical socio political themes.

- *La Llave de Mi Corazon* (EMI Televisa, US).

A return to his roots earned mega-star Guerra two well-earned Latin Grammys in 2007. A series of great pop-chata love songs, some acoustic-guitar solo pieces and plenty of slick, hard-driving merengue as well.

- *Los Grandes Exitos* (Karen, US).

This greatest-hits album is the best introduction to Guerra's extensive oeuvre, though it inexplicably excludes a couple of essential hits from Fogarate.

Los Hermanos Rosario

The Rosario brothers have led one of the most popular merengue bands on the island and abroad for over fifteen years.

- *Y Es Fácil!* (Karen, US).

Los Hermanos Rosario best represent the exuberant excesses of merengue since the

traditional rumba, calypso and merengue beats of the Caribbean, grooving just as hard as in mainstream Latin music but with a defiantly populist slant. Taking this trend a step further is singer **Xiomara Fortuna**, who is the first Dominican musician to ride this movement to the top of the world music charts in the West. Like other Dominican Roots artists, Fortuna co-opts the lesser-known beats of

1980s and this is the album for which they won a Latin Grammy, a high-octane, cardiac-arresting thrill ride through hit after hit.

Luís Segura
The great star of pre-Guerra bachata, with a soulful, reedy voice that's truly timeless.

- *El Disco de Oro* (Kubaney).

Two-CD tribute that contains all of his classic hits, which span over twenty years of recording. The seminal song *Pena Por Ti* is deemed so important by the compilation's producers that it's included twice – once on each disc.

Francisco Ulloa
The greatest of the merengue accordionists. On some cuts he also incorporates the marimbula, a descendant of the African thumb piano, a wooden box with strips of metal attached that when plucked give off a deep, reverberating thrum.

- *!Merengue!* (Globe Style, UK).

Never has the accordion sounded like this. His most famous recording, featuring frantic arpeggios from accordion and saxophone, free-sounding triple-time bass and a driving throb from the tambora.

- *!Ultramerengue!* (Globe Style, UK).

Features merenguized renditions of lesser-known Dominican traditional music like the *mangulina*, *plena*, *canto de hacha* and *pambiche*.

Cuco Valoy
Although Cuco Valoy – "El Brujo" as he is known – is from the Dominican Republic, he is as likely to perform bachata or Cuban-style son as merengue. He's equally virtuosic in all three styles.

- *Salsa con Coco* (Discolor, US).

This collection of some of the man's greatest hits is well worth getting, not least because it contains perhaps his most famous song, *Juliana*, and the typically loopy *La Muerte de Don Marcos.*

Wilfrido Vargas
The legendary merengue innovator and dignified elder statesman who brought the influence of a dozen different world musical forms into the family.

- *Abusadura* (Karen, US).

One of his most striking and popular recordings, with influences across world music and merengue versions of a couple of classic bachatas.

Johnny Ventura
The Dominican Elvis did a lot to update the music and was the first *merenguero* to fashion for himself an image as a pop icon.

- *Guataco* (Kubaney, US).

A classic Ventura album with many of his hits. Great singing with an old-time saxophone sound (sort of an accordion impression with arpeggios and mile-wide, furious vibrato), even as the influence of disco begins to creep in.

the countryside like *pri-pri*, *mangulina* and *salves*, but combines them with a more forward-looking production akin to contemporary West African pop.

Other emerging artists have instead been focusing on North American hip-hop, although most of the **merenhouse rap** at the top of the charts these days has yet to approach the best of either genre and is starting to get drowned out by the hipper **reggaeton** coming out of Puerto Rico and Panama. The fusing of merengue with house music is predictably decried in more traditional circles, but the history of merengue is an account of similar reinventions and consequent destructions; merengue has always adapted and survived. The genre's regular beat structure is well suited to house music fusions and many of the dance remixes work extremely well. The result is a slew of Latin rap ensembles with one ear on the *périco ripao* grooves of their parents and the other on the multilayered industrial urban noise of young African America. Those who grew up with the music can take comfort that the old forms lie embedded in the new like geological strata. The most prominent merenhouse band, **Fulanito**, for example, pays homage to the history of their music by large-scale sampling of the accordion and other traditional instruments, whispering in the background like a ghost memory.

Baseball

The Dominican Republic is responsible for a disproportionate number of today's top **baseball** players: just for starters, Manny Ramirez, Pedro Martínez and Alex Rodríguez are all household names in the United States; among the very best at their positions, they command salaries in excess of ten million dollars a year. It's the result of a century-long Dominican passion for the game that makes North American baseball fanaticism pale in comparison. Dominican boys are exposed to baseball from almost the moment they're born and playing fields can be found in even the smallest villages. Dominican professional games command huge crowds and the successes and failures of Dominicans in the major leagues are televised across the country and assiduously reported in the newspapers. The veneration heaped on these homegrown players can't be overstated; when Sammy Sosa returned from his MVP season with the Chicago Cubs in 1998, he was greeted by a line of cheering locals for the full 40km from Santo Domingo's airport to his hometown of San Pedro de Macorís.

Plantations to professionalism

In the late nineteenth century, the **United States** began to export its national pastime to countries around the world, especially those where it had some sort of military presence. The game was thus spread to Cuba, Central America, Mexico, Venezuela and Japan, though it would take slightly longer for the sport to take root in the Dominican Republic. Here its history is inextricably linked to the rise of sugar plantations in the 1860s, when wealthy **Cuban plantation owners** fled a revolution in their own country that freed their slaves and destroyed much of their property. Many resettled in Santo Domingo, where they founded several youth clubs devoted to baseball that weaned local kids away from football (soccer); others headed to the DR's southeast, buying land from the government, forcibly evicting any peasants who happened to live there and establishing sugar mills around tiny fishing hamlets La Romana and San Pedro de Macorís. In the 1880s the Cuban owners began providing minimal baseball equipment to their workers as a cheap diversion to keep up morale.

By the early twentieth century, the game had been adopted to such an extent that several **semi-professional ballclubs** were formed in Santo Domingo, Santiago, San Pedro and La Romana, both to play each other and face teams from Puerto Rico and Cuba in various tournaments. The **American occupation** that lasted from 1916 to 1924 resulted in further inroads, as military administrators saw baseball as a convenient way to insinuate US culture into the country. They provided money to form amateur Dominican clubs and purchase equipment and organized their troops into teams that regularly played Dominican squads. The Dominicans, though, saw these games as a matter of pride; whenever they defeated a military club, impromptu parties carried on well into the night.

Towards the end of the occupation, **professional baseball** in the country took on the shape and structure that remains today, with two teams in Santo Domingo – Licey and Escogido – and one each in San Pedro, La Romana and even Santiago, which at the time was an arduous four-day muleback trek for any visiting team. When **Rafael Trujillo** came to power in 1930, though, his son Ramfis – a rabid baseball fan – forced Licey's ownership to sell out to him and in turn signed some of the best talent in the country to contracts far too lucrative for local box-office revenues to support. For the Trujillos this was no problem; they had ownership of all major industries in the country and were rich enough to write off Ramfis' pricey hobby as a public relations expense. But the other teams followed suit in order to keep up – despite the fact that their owners depended far more on baseball earnings for their profits – and a tremendous bidding war ensued for both the best Dominicans as well as the cream of the crop from other Caribbean islands and the American Negro Leagues, the latter of which were unable to break into the major leagues in the States until Jackie Robinson did so, in 1948.

The legendary 1937 season

In 1936, **San Pedro de Macorís** (a city the Trujillos hated for its opposition to their rule) beat Licey in the national championship behind Dominican sluggers **Tetelo Vargas** and **Mateo de la Rosa**, the first great batsmen the island produced. In response to his defeat, Ramfis joined Licey and Escogido together into a Ciudad Trujillo super-team that he hoped would restore the family honour. To counter this, San Pedro's scouts flew off to Pittsburgh to sign the top Negro League stars from the **Pittsburgh Crawfords**, which were run by local mobster Gus Greenlee. Despite being arrested on arrival – on orders from Greenlee – the scouts did, once out of custody, manage to sign the team's three best ballplayers (all three now in the baseball hall of fame): pitcher **Satchel Paige**, slugger **Josh Gibson** and lightning-fast centre fielder **Cool Papa Bell**.

These signings should have made San Pedro de Macorís invincible, but more bad fortune was to befall the scouts. Upon the representatives' return to San Pedro, Trujillo's men threw them in jail and government troops informed the three players that they would be suiting up instead for Ciudad Trujillo. Paige, Gibson and Bell were joined on that team by several other top Negro Leaguers and infielder **Perucho Cepeda**, father of hall-of-famer Orlando Cepeda and considered the best Latin player of his day. A third team, Santiago, got into the act, signing Dominican hero **Horacio Martínez** along with Venezuelan shortstop **Luís Aparicio** and Cubans **Luís Tiant** (father of the Boston Red Sox pitching star of the same name) and hall-of-famer **Martín Dihigo**, a versatile pitcher/outfielder who had played in Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba and the US, where he had the Negro League's highest batting average and lowest ERA (the mark by which pitchers are rated) in the same year.

The hard-fought battles between these three teams are still legendary in the Dominican Republic, though for Paige, Gibson and Bell the bizarre antics of the Trujillo family were probably more memorable. After Ciudad dropped the season opener to San Pedro, Paige reported that the team was surrounded by a phalanx of soldiers who fired their automatic weapons into the air while shouting, "The Benefactor doesn't like to lose!" If a fight broke out during a game, the National Police swarmed the field and clobbered the opposing team; meanwhile, the Americans were routinely jailed the night before a game to ensure they got a good night's rest.

After a gruelling regular season, the **Ciudad Trujillo Dragones** knocked off Santiago and faced defending champion San Pedro in a best-of-seven **championship series**. Taken from their prison cells to Quisqueya Stadium under armed escort, the Dragones were edgy enough that they dropped the first three games. For his part, Paige was firmly convinced that if they didn't come from behind to win the series they'd be going back to the States in pinewood boxes; he spent the entire series popping antacid tablets as he glanced warily from the dugout at the troops who surrounded the field. Fortunately, his theory was never tested: the Dragones took the next four games to win the national championship. A week-long city festival ensued, but the vast amounts of money used to finance the 1937 season bankrupted the other owners and **ended professional Dominican baseball** for ten years, shifting local sentiment to the **amateur national** team the country put together – using a unit of the Dominican army as Trujillo's personal farm club.

The English

Though professional Dominican baseball went into a tailspin, the sport was attracting a new generation of players and fans in the rural sugar *bateyes*. The most prominent such group was the Cocolos, also known as "**The English**", impoverished immigrants from the British Caribbean who came to the DR at the turn of the century as seasonal cane cutters and settled around San Pedro de Macorís. There was little to alleviate the misery of their squalid living conditions other than benefits from the Improvement Organizations founded in the 1910s by **Marcus Garvey**'s UNIA, which collected money for workers' medical expenses, held social events and created a sports league. This sports league, however, was for **cricket**, the pastime that the Cocolos had brought over from the British Antilles, but during the hype of the 1937 baseball season many were weaned from their native sport and won over to this new Dominican obsession.

At first the English ballplayers were largely ignored in the rest of the DR and excluded from the amateur national teams. **The first wave** of Dominican players to catch the eye of the newly integrated major leagues in the early 1950s came from the talent pool that had worked its way through the army and Trujillo's amateur team, including the Alou brothers, hall-of-famers Ozzie Virgil and Juan Marichal – all of whom were signed by the San Francisco Giants – and Dodger great Manny Mota. But when a team from **Batey Consuelo** north of San Pedro whipped the military team several years in a row in the 1950s, players from the *bateyes* began to gain far more prominence, being recruited for the national team and falling under the watchful eyes of American scouts. The first Cocolo to break through to the big leagues was slugger **Rico Carty** in the 1960s; shortly thereafter the majors would be swamped with the sons of San Pedro, including Pedro Guerrero, George Bell, Juan Samuel, Tony Fernández, Alfredo Griffin, Manny Lee, Julio Franco, Joaquín Andujar, José Offerman, Mariano Duncan, Sammy Sosa and so on.

The modern game

Today, an astounding ten percent of the players in the US major and minor leagues comes from the Dominican Republic, more, in fact, than the rest of Latin America put together. Of those professional players, an equally astounding number hail from around the city of **San Pedro**, known in baseball circles as "the city of shortstops". This pipeline of talent has been honed into a **well-oiled business**, which has not been slowed down by the **steroid controversy** in the United States that has engulfed a number of top Dominican players including Alex Rodríguez; the downside of all the success – as much wealth and fame as it may bring both to individual players and to the country as a whole – is that Dominican baseball is no longer operating nearly as independently as it once did.

The old **Dominican professional league** alignment still largely exists: two Santo Domingo teams and one each from Santiago, La Romana and San Pedro face off against each other in a regular **winter season** that features a blend of Dominican stars from the majors, up-and-coming young local talent and American minor leaguers looking to sharpen their game, often coached by retired stars like Santiago's Tony Peña. The champion of the winter season goes on to face off teams from Venezuela, Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Latin American championship.

Professional teams in the Dominican Republic, however, all enter into formal agreements with **North American clubs** and act as little more than a developmental team for the parent club. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer of the **best Dominican players** are willing to endanger multimillion-dollar careers by playing back home and they're strongly discouraged from doing so by their major league club, for fear of injuries. The entire country is scoured by **scouts** from professional teams in the United States, Canada and even Japan; most kids who display some talent are signed and whisked off to a major league camp by the time they're 16 or 17. As a result, many of the top young Dominicans never play professional ball locally.

But while other North American companies that move into the DR and take control of an economic sector are resented here, baseball's major leagues are positively lionized for it. Today every North American club has a complex in the DR where they recruit and train young Dominicans for up to three years before moving the best of the bunch on to their minor league system. Major league scouts have been known to commit a variety of **abuses** in the quest for cheap Dominican talent, including signing underage players, hiding prospects from their families so that they won't be stolen by another team and failing to pay out promised signing bonuses. Some of their jobs are being taken over by unofficial **buscandos**, who track down talented youngsters, sign them to an agreement and then auction them off to the highest bidder for a percentage of the signing bonus. The competitive fever pitch in search of the next Pedro Martínez or Sammy Sosa has climbed so high that the traditional attraction for major league clubs – inexpensive talent that can be bought for less than a third of what it would take to sign a comparable kid in the United States – is very much in danger. Ten years ago, **emerging stars** would have felt lucky to sign a US$3000, three-year development contract with a North American organization, but today they're being signed to minor league contracts in excess of $1 million per year. Meanwhile, less-coveted players as young as 13 and as old as 23 regularly purchase **fake birth certificates** to claim that they're 16 or 17 years old, the optimum legal age to begin training.

Books

Dominican literature is not very well known worldwide, mainly because so little of it is available in translation, but recently there has been a surge in influence by a younger generation of Dominican authors, most residing in the United States and writing in English, rather than Spanish. Led by Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz, they have begun to find both critical and commercial success.

History

Bartolomé de las Casas *The Devastation of the Indies* (Johns Hopkins). A translation of the document that Las Casas, a priest who fought tirelessly for the rights of the Tainos, read to Spain's Fernando and Isabela in an effort to end colonial injustice against Native Americans.

Samuel Hazard *Santo Domingo Past & Present with a Glance at Hayti* (Dominican Ministry of Culture). A lively, if sometimes unsavoury in its racist commentary, mid-nineteenth-century account of travelling the entire country, written from the perspective of an American bureaucrat trying to push forward US annexation.

Kris E. Lane *Pillaging the Empire* (Sharpe). A terrific history of piracy in the Caribbean between 1500 and 1750, including snappy accounts of the buccaneers who hunted wild animals off Hispaniola's north coast and the pirates who made a lair of the Samaná Bay – among the memorable cast of characters are Jack Banister, Cofresí, Calico Jack Rackham, Sir Francis Drake, Henry Morgan, and female pirates Anne Bonney and Mary Read.

Abraham F. Lowenthal *The Dominican Intervention* (Johns Hopkins). A blow-by-blow analysis of the chaotic events that led to American intervention in 1965. The author uses this military action to prove that foreign policies are as controlled by bad analogies (in this case "Another Cuba") and insufficient intelligence as they are by rational strategies.

W.J. Nelson *Almost a Territory* (St Martin's). A lucid history of the various nineteenth-century attempts by the United States to annex either the Dominican Republic or the Samaná Peninsula. The colourful cast of characters, including Dominican *caudillos* Buenaventura Báez and Pedro Santana and US President Ulysses S. Grant, keep the book lively.

Thomas O. Ott *The Haitian Revolution* (Tennessee). The best account currently published in English of the slave revolt that created the world's first black republic on the western end of Hispaniola, including Touissant L'Ouverture's occupation of Santo Domingo.

Frank Moya Pons *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (Hispaniola). Written and translated by the Dominican Republic's foremost historian, this is the definitive history of the country. A blessing since it first came out in 1995, as before then a good history of the country didn't exist in English.

Eric Paul Roorda *Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime, 1930–1945* (Duke). An essential history of American presidents Herbert Hoover and FDR's failed "Good Neighbor Policy" in Latin America, detailing how Trujillo managed to maintain support in Washington by siding against first the Fascists and later the Communists, despite the blatant horrors of his regime.

Irving Rouse *The Tainos* (Yale). The definitive work of scholarship on the Tainos, tracing their migration from the Amazon river basin to the Antilles and their eventual extermination at the hands of the Spaniards. This book is a must if you're planning to see some of the Taino sites spread across the DR.

Richard Lee Turits *Foundations of Despotism* (Stanford University). Explores the entire history of the Dominican Republic with an emphasis on how the Trujillo dictatorship happened, concluding that Trujillo's real power came from his patrician empowerment of the peasant classes, who were a strong base of support throughout the course of his regime. Required reading for anyone who really wants to understand what made the Trujillo era tick.

Edwin Williamson *The Penguin History of Latin America* (Penguin). This excellent history contains by far the best and most judicious account in print of Columbus's voyages and Santo Domingo's early days.

Fiction and poetry

Julia Alvarez *In the Name of Salomé*; *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*; *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*; *In the Time of the Butterflies*; *Yo!* (Plume, Penguin). A leading American writer who grew up in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez's lucid prose, by turns comic and sublime, rewards any time spent with it. *García Girls* and *Yo!* centre on middle-class Dominican immigrants in New York, while *Butterflies* recounts the tale of the Mirabal sisters, who stood up to Trujillo's repression and were assassinated for it. *Salomé* is a singular work that blends a story of immigration similar to *García Girls* with the tale of a short-lived nineteenth-century revolution inspired by Dominican poet Salomé Ureña.

Edwidge Danticat *The Farming of Bones* (Abacus/Soho). Best-selling historical novel by a young Haitian-American, set along the Haitian border during the terror of Operación Perejil (see p.279). The writing is lush and moving, and the events come vividly to life.

Junot Díaz *Drown* (Faber and Faber); *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Riverhead). The latter novel, an account of a geeky, comic-book-loving Dominican-American kid that traverses high art prose and Spanglish street lingo, sometimes in a near-stream-of-consciousness style, has garnered well-deserved critical accolades. *Drown* is an excellent collection of short stories that focuses on life on the urban streets of tough New Jersey towns.

Manuel Jesús de Galván & Robert Graves *The Cross and the Sword* (AMS). Robert Graves' classic English translation of *Enriquillo*, the nineteenth-century novel that transformed Dominican identity.

Marío Vargas Llosa *The Feast of the Goat* (Picador). This truly outstanding novel by a Nobel Prize-winning fiction writers engages in a multilevel narrative that manages to capture the whole Dickensian panorama of destruction that took place during the Trujillo era while outlining the last days of Trujillo and the bloody outcome of his assassination. A true page-turner in the best sense.

Viriato Sención *They Forged the Signature of God* (Curbstone). Artful novel tinged with magical realism, taking a swipe at fictionalized versions of dictators Trujillo and Balaguer as it follows the lives of three young seminarians losing their innocence.

Society, politics and culture

Michiel Baud *Peasants and Tobacco in the Dominican Republic, 1870–1930* (Tennessee). A detailed and surprisingly engaging account of peasant society in the Cibao valley during the great Dominican tobacco boom, with a lot of information on the intricacies of the market.

Denise Brennan *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (Duke University). A fascinating examination of the Sosúa sex tourism business, from the perspective of sex workers, customers and facilitators.

Marcos Breton & José Luís Villegas *Away Games* (University of New Mexico). Follows the life of Oakland As' shortstop Miguel Tejada from his initial signing to a US$2000 contract through his life in the Dominican and minor leagues and up to his entry into the majors and emerging stardom. Not just fan propaganda, though; it clearly outlines the trials and troubles of the thousands of Dominican prospects who never make it that far.

Eric Thomas Chester *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff and Commies* (New York University Press). This is an enlightening outline of the American military intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965–66. Shows how this invasion broke Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy" and initiated an era of constant American military intervention throughout Latin America.

Barbara Fischkin *Muddy Cup* (Scribner). This remarkably well written and moving book tracks a Dominican family for four generations as they make the transition from a tiny Dominican mountain village to the barrios of New York.

Steven Gregory *The Devil Behind the Mirror* (University of California). A fascinating and kaleidoscopic view of the impact of globalization on Boca Chica and the surrounding towns, in terms of industrialization, sex tourism, Dominican–Haitian relations and a range of other fascinating angles.

José Itzigsohn *Developing Poverty* (Pennsylvania State). An analysis of the effects of industrial free zones and the informal economies of the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica on overall economic health and job growth. Presents a well-balanced look at the pros and cons and though the material is a bit dry, it will give you a good inside look at the inner workings of Dominican work life.

Allan M. Klein *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* (Yale). A fun, book-length essay on baseball in the Dominican Republic, analyzing the country's obsession with it and how it plays into the relations between the DR and the United States.

Peggy Levitt *The Transnational Villagers* (University of California). Based on detailed fieldwork by the author, this is an account of a family of Dominicans from the Dominican *campo* of Miraflores who split their time between their hometown and the Jamaica Plain neighbourhood of Boston. Challenges the idea that transnationality and cultural assimilation are in conflict and provides an interesting examination of the Dominican family's experiences in the United States with regards to gender and race.

Samuel Martínez *Peripheral Migrants: Haitians and Dominican Republic Sugar Plantations* (Universty of Tennessee). A scholarly and sobering examination of the mass migration of Haitian labourers to Dominican sugar *bateyes*, with plenty of fascinating description of their dangerous journeys across the border and their living conditions once they arrive.

Valentina Peguero *The Militarization of Culture in the Dominican Republic, from the Captains General to General Trujillo* (University of Nebraska). Traces the interaction of the military and civilian Dominican population over the course of the island's entire post-Columbus history, explaining how the military ethos has come to pervade every aspect of Dominican society.

Rob Ruck *The Tropic of Baseball* (Carroll & Graf). A history of baseball in the DR, including eyewitness accounts of sandlot games, profiles of major Dominican stars and a definitive history of the *Cocolos* of San Pedro de Macorís.

Helen Safa *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (Westview). An interesting analysis of the changing role of women in the DR, Puerto Rico and Cuba, showing how low-wage industrialization, like that in the assembly lines of Dominican industrial free zones, has altered Dominican society.

Michele Wucker *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians and the Struggle for Hispaniola* (Hill & Wang). This extremely well written, thoroughly researched account of the conflict between the Dominican Republic and Haiti is a must-read for those who want to understand the island.

Music, art and architecture

Paul Austerlitz *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* (Temple). Engagingly written ode to merengue, including the first complete history of the music and an analysis of what it reflects about Dominican society. Indispensable for understanding Dominican music and culture.

Fatima Bercht & Estrellita Brodsky *Tainos: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean* (Monacelli). A beautifully presented coffee-table book with photographs of the most impressive Taino relics extant.

Deborah Pacini Hernández *Bachata: A Social History of Dominican Popular Music* (Temple). Highly recommended journey into the heart of Dominican bachata, including an account of its origins in various pre-existing Caribbean forms, its transmission to the cities via waves of urban migration and the somewhat informal industry that built up around it before it gained social acceptance with the Dominican middle classes.

Veerle Poupeye *Caribbean Art* (Thames and Hudson). The best source book for information on the visual art of the Caribbean, including a generous section dedicated to contemporary Dominican painting.

Henry Shukman *Travels with my Trombone: A Caribbean Journey* (Crown). A lively account of a freelance musician's wanderings across the Spanish Caribbean, including the Dominican Republic, in various Latin bands.

Religion

Jan Lundius *The Great Power of God in San Juan Valley* (Lund). A wonderful, sorely needed study of rural Dominican messiah Liborio and his lasting influence on the religion of peasants in the San Juan valley. Difficult to get hold of as it's published in Sweden, but worth the effort.

David Martin *Tongues of Fire* (Westview). An analysis of the explosion of Pentecostalism in the Dominican Republic and across Latin America over the past few decades.

Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz *Cultura Popular e Identidad Nacional* (Instituto Dominicano de Folklore). A wonderful, two-volume survey of various aspects of Dominican folk religion, with a refreshingly frank explanation of the African as well as Spanish roots of many local festivals and beliefs.

Nature

Ken DuPree *Whales of Samaná* (Samaná). A very informative pamphlet on the humpback whales of the Bahía de Samaná and Silver Banks Sanctuary, widely available in the city of Samaná.

Jurgen Hoppe *Flowering Trees of the Dominican Republic*; *National Parks of the Dominican Republic* (APEB; Fundación Barceló). Available only in Santo Domingo, these are excellent paperback guides to the flora and fauna of the DR, with beautiful colour photographs.

Eugene Kaplan *A Field Guide to the Coral Reefs of the Caribbean and Florida* (Houghton Mifflin). An excellent and attractive guide to the region's reefs and reef life.

G.W. Lennox & S.A. Seddon *Flowers of the Caribbean*; *Trees of the Caribbean*; *Fruits and Vegetables of the Caribbean* (Macmillan, UK). Handy pocket-sized books, with glossy, sharp, colour photos and a good general introduction to the region's flora.

George & Roberta Poinar *The Amber Forest: Reconstruction of a Vanished World* (Princeton). A wonderful book that analyzes hundreds of animals and plants trapped in Dominican amber in order to reconstruct the tropical jungle that existed here in the time of the dinosaurs.

Herbert Raffaele *Birds of the West Indies* (Princeton). The authoritative guide to birding in the Dominican Republic and throughout the region, by far the most comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date resource on the subject.

Food

Clara Gonzalez *Aunt Clara's Dominican Cookbook* (Lunch Club Press). A handy and comprehensive guide to preparing a vast array of Dominican dishes, from simple staples like rice and beans and *morir soñando* through complicated day-long recipes for *sancocho* and *pescado con coco*.

Language

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Spanish

Though most people who work in the tourism industry speak English – sometimes along with German, French or Italian – you'll find that nearly everyone you meet outside the resort areas speaks only **Spanish**. The few places where English is spoken as a first language are parts of the Samaná Peninsula, where a community of nineteenth-century African-American migrants still exists, and in the sugarcane *bateyes* around San Pedro de Macorís, where many of the older folk came to the Dominican Republic from English-speaking islands like St Thomas and Tortola as migrant sugarcane cutters.

If you want to get to know Dominicans, then, it makes sense to acquire some Spanish before you arrive. You'll have to learn quite a lot to get to know people, surely, but the basics will make travelling easier and more enjoyable, since you'll be able to ask for bus times, order food, find rooms, and so on. Dominicans are endlessly patient with those struggling to speak their language, and will not only tolerate but appreciate the attempt. Berlitz offers excellent Spanish **courses** that you can order online – materials include a dictionary, a verb reference book, several workbooks and CDs for practising pronunciation – or for the basics you can come armed with the *Rough Guide to Mexican Spanish* **phrasebook** (available in bookstores everywhere or from an online bookstore – head first to Ⓦwww.roughguides.com), which will equip you with an array of practical Spanish snippets necessary for getting around the country. The *Collins Gem Spanish Dictionary* is a comprehensive, pocket-sized **dictionary** available in most bookstores in the English-speaking world.

Pronunciation

The rules of **pronunciation** are pretty straightforward and strictly observed. Unless there's an accent, all words ending in l, r and z are stressed on the last syllable, all others on the second last. In the Dominican Republic the final "s" of a word sometimes gets dropped; thus you'll often hear "buena" for "buenas" or "do" for "dos". All vowel sounds are pure and short.

A somewhere between the A sound in "back" and that in "father".

E as in "get".

I as in "police".

O as in "hot".

U as in "rule".

C is soft before E and I, hard otherwise: cerca is pronounced "serka".

G works the same way: a guttural H sound (like the ch in "loch") before E or I, a hard G elsewhere: gigante becomes "higante".

H is always silent.

J is the same sound as guttural G: jamón is pronounced "hamón".

LL is pronounced as a Y at the beginning of a word, a soft J elsewhere: llama is pronounced "yama", but ballena (whale) becomes "bajzhena" instead of "bayena".

N is as in English, unless it has a tilde accent over it, when it becomes NY: mañana sounds like "manyana".

QU is pronounced like the English K.

R is rolled, RR doubly so.

V sounds more like B, vino becoming "beano".

Z is the same as the soft C: cerveza is thus "serbesa".

Useful words and phrases

Basics

yes, no	sí, no
please, thank you	por favor, gracias
where, when	dónde, cuando
here, there	aquí, allí
what, how much	qué, cuanto
now, later	ahora, más tarde
open, closed	abierto/a, cerrado/a
with, without	con, sin
good, bad	bueno/a, malo/a
big, small	grande, pequeño/a
more, less	más, menos
today, tomorrow	hoy, mañana
yesterday	ayer
this, that	este, eso

Greetings and responses

Do you speak English?	¿Habla inglés?
Good afternoon/ night	Buenas tardes/ noches
Good morning	Buenos días
Hello, goodbye	Hola, adiós
How are you?	¿Como está?
I am English	Soy inglés(a)
…American…	americano/a
…Australian…	australiano/a
…Canadian…	canadiense/a
…Irish…	irlandés(a)
…Scottish…	escosés(a)
…Welsh…	galés(a)
I don't speak Spanish	No hablo español
I (don't) understand	(No) Entiendo
My name is…	Me llamo…
Not at all/you're welcome	De nada
See you later	Hasta luego
Sorry	Lo siento
What did you say?	¿Como?
What is your name?	¿Como se llama usted?

Hotels

Can one…?	¿Se puede…?
Do you know…?	¿Sabe…?
Do you have…?	¿Tiene…?
…the time	…la hora
…a room	…un habitación
…with two beds	…con dos camas
Don't you have anything cheaper?	¿No tiene algo más barato?
Give me… (one like that)	Deme… (uno así)
How much is it?	Cuánto es?
I'd like	Quisiera
I don't know	No sé
I want	Quiero
It's fine(?)	(¿)Está bien(?)
It's for one person	Es para una persona
…two persons	…dos personas
…for one night (one week)	…para una noche (una semana)
It's too expensive	Es demasiado caro
Is there a hotel nearby?	¿Hay un hotel aquí?

Transport

How do I get to…?	¿Por dónde se va a…?
…the bus station	…el estación de autobuses?
…the nearest bank	…el banco más cercano?
…the toilet	…el baño?
Left, right	Izquierda, derecha
Straight on	Derecho, siga
There is (is there?)	(¿) Hay (?)
Where is…?	¿Dónde está…?
Where does the bus to	¿De dónde sale el
…leave from?	autobus para...?
I'd like a (return) ticket to…	Quisiera un tiquete (de ida y vuelta)
What time does it leave (arrive in…)?	¿A qué hora sale para…(llega en…)?
What's that?	¿Qué es eso?

Numbers and days

1	un/uno/una
2	dos
3	tres

4	cuatro
5	cinco
6	seis
7	siete
8	ocho
9	nueve
10	diez
11	once
12	doce
13	trece
14	catorce
15	quince
16	dieciséis
20	veinte
21	veintiuno
30	treinta
40	cuarenta
50	cincuenta
60	sesenta
70	setenta
80	ochenta
90	noventa
100	cien(to)
101	ciento uno
200	doscientos
201	doscientos uno
500	quinientos
1000	mil
2000	dos mil
2001	dos mil uno

first	primero/a
second	segundo/a
third	tercero/a

Monday	lunes
Tuesday	martes
Wednesday	miércoles
Thursday	jueves
Friday	viernes
Saturday	sábado
Sunday	domingo

Food and drink

Basics

¿Hay?…	Do you have? (Is there…?)
Un menú, por favor	A menu, please
La cuenta, por favor	The bill, please
Quiero…	I would like…
Soy un vegetariano/a	I'm a vegetarian
Sin carne	Without meat
Dos cervezas	Two beers
¡Salud!	Cheers!
pan	bread
arroz	rice
mantequilla	butter
queso	typical white Dominican cheese
sal	salt
pimienta	pepper
cilantro	coriander
azúcar	sugar
huevos	eggs

Useful terms

La bandera dominicana	rice and beans, sometimes with bits of chicken
barbacoa	barbecued
al carbón	grilled
cómida criolla	Dominican cuisine
criolla	tomato-based creole sauce
frito	fried
al horno	roasted

Soups and salads

crema de habichuelas rojas	creamed red-bean soup
crema de maíz	cream of corn soup
ensalada aguacate	sliced avocados with oil and vinegar
ensalada campesina	watercress, tomatoes, oregano and radishes

ensalada típica	shredded cabbage and carrots with oil and vinegar
ensalada verde	green salad
mondongo	tripe stew
sancocho	stew with several kinds of meat, tubers and an array of spices
sopa de guandules	pigeon-pea soup
sopa de morros	black bean and rice soup
sopa pescado	fish soup
sopa verdura	vegetable soup

Meat

bistec	beefsteak
bistec encebollado	beefsteak with onions
carne ripiada	shredded beef
chicarrones	fried bits of pork or chicken
chivo	goat
chuletas de puerco	pork chops
empanadas	ground-beef-filled pastries
jamón	ham
longaniza	spicy sausage made from pork tripe, ground pork, garlic and oregano
mofongo	pork rinds, plantains and garlic
parrillada	Argentine-style meat platter
pollo al carbón	grilled chicken in a cream sauce
pollo frito	fried chicken
puerco	pork
quipes	cracked-wheat fritters with ground beef

Seafood

atún	tuna
calamar	squid
camarones	shrimp
cangrejo	crab
carite	kingfish
chillo	red snapper
lambí	conch
langosta	clawless lobster
mariscos	seafood
mero	sea bass
pulpo	octopus

Fruits and vegetables

aguacate	avocado
fresas	strawberries
guineo	banana
lechoza	papaya
limón	lemon
mango	mango
naranja, china	orange
piña	pineapple
tamarindo	tamarind
batata	sweet potato
cassava	yuca
cebolla	onion
habichuelas	red beans
maíz	corn
mangú	mashed plantains with onions and oil
morros	black peas and rice
papa	potato
papas fritas	French fries
plátano	plantain
tomate	tomato
tostones	double-fried plantains

Desserts

arroz con leche	rice pudding
dulce con coco	coconut sweet
dulce de leche	milk sweet
flan	flan/custard
flan de leche	milk custard
flan de maíz	corn custard
helado	ice cream
pudin de pan	bread pudding

Drinks

agua	water
agua purificada	purified water
batida	fruit shake with pulp
café con leche	coffee with hot milk
café solo	black coffee

cerveza	beer
Cuba libre	rum and Coke
jugo	juice
jugo de naranja, **jugo de china**	orange juice

leche	milk
refresco	juice with sugar
ron	rum

Glossary

Dominican terms

Below are some useful Spanish **terms** and **Dominican phrases** not necessarily listed in the above Spanish-language section. Many of them have been used throughout the guide and can commonly be heard in daily parlance in the Dominican Republic. As well, a number of **Taino** words have made their way into the contemporary Dominican vocabulary, though the meaning has drifted a bit over the centuries; some of the more prominent follow.

agua de melao shallow or without substance.

apagón power blackout.

areito long narrative songs used by the Tainos to depict and celebrate battles and other important events, used by Juan Luís Guerra as the title of a famous album.

bachata twangy ballad music, with a steadily emphasized offbeat.

bahía bay.

balneario swimming hole.

barrio neighbourhood.

Belie Belcán patron spirit of the Dominican Republic, both a benevolent protector and a military strongman.

bien-bienes the wandering souls of dead *cimarrones*, who haunt the Haitian border at night, stealing food from peasants' gardens.

botánica shop where folk religion items can be purchased.

bracero Haitian cane cutter.

buscando a "finder", or someone who offers himself as a freelance guide for tourists.

cabaña turística sets of hotel rooms with attached garages and hourly rates, used mainly by local couples as sex stops.

calle street.

campesino rural Dominican peasantry.

campo settlement too small to be considered a pueblo.

casa de cambio small currency-exchange shop.

casa de huespedes also called *pensión*, a private home with rooms to let to travellers.

caudillo nineteenth-century strongman who ruled the country by force of arms.

chin a little bit.

ciguapa the souls of dead Taino women who escaped the rapacious Spanish settlers by hiding out in the Cordillera Central.

ciudad city.

club gallístico circular, two-tiered wooden venues for cockfights.

Cocolo disparaging term referring to the English-speaking, black, seasonal sugar labourers who cut Dominican cane around the turn of the twentieth century.

cofradía Dominican religious brotherhoods that involve the worship of patron African deities syncretized to Catholic saints. Most are called Hermanidad del Congo and worship Kalunda/the Holy Spirit.

colmado grocery shack, especially prevalent in the countryside.

comedor small, family-run restaurant serving local food.

cómida criolla Dominican cuisine.

Cuba libre servicio popular way to drink in discos and bars: two Cokes, a bottle of rum and a bucket of ice.

detelengue tight clothes.

Dominican York a Dominican who has emigrated to the United States, though increasingly pejorative, referring to flashy Dominican drug dealers from New York.

encomienda an attempted reform of the Taino slave system by the Spanish Crown, according to which Tainos were to be paid a fair wage for their forced labour and educated in Catholicism.

Evangélico a convert to the burgeoning Pentecostal movement in the Dominican Republic.

fiesta patronal festival for the patron saint of a town or city.

la frontera the Haitian border.

gomero tyre repair shop.

gourde Haitian unit of currency.

guagua privately owned vans and minibuses that are the primary form of transportation in the DR.

güira a metal scraper used in merengue bands.

guloya style of music played by the Cocolo mummers in San Pedro de Macorís, involving fife-and-drum bands and dancing.

hato a large, rural Spanish estate used for raising cattle.

iglesia church.

jevito teenager or twentysomething who always wears the latest fashion.

jonrón a baseball home run.

larimar semiprecious, turquoise stone unique to the Dominican Republic, mined in the Sierra Bahoruco west of Barahona.

mafioso rip-off artist or thug.

Malecón boardwalk avenue along the ocean.

mambo female priest of Haitian Voodoo.

mayimbe the leader of a group, or the greatest at some skill.

merengue the fast-paced national dance music, less rhythmically intricate than salsa, with a repetitive thump right on the beat.

merengue périco ripao old-style acoustic merengue using an instrumentation of accordion, tambora, *güira* and African thumb piano.

momise the Dominican mispronunciation of "mummers", dancers who parade around San Pedro de Macorís at Christmas and during the *fiesta patronal*, performing from door to door in exchange for money and rum.

motoconcho small-engined motorbikes used for inter-city transport.

pájaro a popular euphemism, meaning "bird", used to refer to gay men.

Parque Central the square central park in every Dominican town that generally serves as the centre of socializing and commerce.

pensión a private home with rooms to let to travellers.

peso the unit of Dominican currency.

público weather-beaten automobiles used as public transport in the cities and between towns along the north coast.

pueblo small town.

río river.

sanky panky practice of some underpaid Dominican resort employees acting as "escorts" to tourists in exchange for money and gifts.

Santera standard term used to refer to Dominican syncretism, without any of the pejorative associations of *Vodú*.

sierra mountain range.

son Cuban form of guitar music which is especially popular in Santo Domingo, and which many Dominicans claim was created here.

Taino Native Americans who inhabited the Dominican Republic and much of the Caribbean at the time of Columbus's arrival.

tambora a lap drum that's a standard instrument in merengue bands, held and slapped by a hand at one end while it's drummed with a stick at the other.

yola leaky fishing boats used by Dominicans to emigrate illegally to Puerto Rico.

Tainoisms

batey the public plaza at the centre of every Taino community, today it refers to the meagre rows of shacks where Haitian cane cutters live and work.

bohío once the circular thatch homes of Taino commoners, it now means a thatch-and-mud hut of a rural Dominican farmer.

cacique Taino word signifying both a political leader and the tribe which he commanded; sometimes used today to denote a corrupt town boss.

caney large rectangular great-house of the Taino nobles.

canoa small wooden canoes used to travel rivers.

cassava the bread made from yuca root which served as the major staple in the Taino diet, and is still quite popular locally.

cemi stone Taino idol with flared nostrils and inward-spiralling eyes that was believed to hold benevolent spirits.

conuco originally, an environmentally sound method of Taino agriculture (in which multiple crops were grown within mulched large mounds), the word later came to denote the slash-and-burn farming settlement in the wilderness.

dujo intricately carved wooden throne for a *cacique*, usually made of lignum vitae.

Haiti the island of Hispaniola.

hamaca hammock, which was invented by the Tainos.

hupía the spirits of the recently dead, thought to return at night.

Huracán the great Taino god of evil, who had to be constantly appeased in order to avoid the destruction of the community. His most visible manifestations were the hurricanes that still plague the Caribbean.

macuteo a bride.

maguey traditional Taino drum.

mao a cotton neck garment worn by *caciques*.

nagua the extremely small, hip-covering cloth worn by married Taino women.

nigua an extremely small insect that buries its eggs inside your flesh, causing nasty lesions.

papaya the English word for this fruit comes from the Taino language.

uiku Taino liquor, made from corn masticated by teenage girls and then allowed to ferment.

Small print and

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A Rough Guide to Rough Guides

Published in 1982, the first Rough Guide – to Greece – was a student scheme that became a publishing phenomenon. Mark Ellingham, a recent graduate in English from Bristol University, had been travelling in Greece the previous summer and couldn't find the right guidebook. With a small group of friends he wrote his own guide, combining a highly contemporary, journalistic style with a thoroughly practical approach to travellers' needs.

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Text editor: Charlotte Melville
Layout: Ajay Verma
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Production: Rebecca Short
Proofreader: Diane Margolis
Cover design: Daniel May and Nicole Newman
Photographer: Dometrio Carrasco
Editorial: **London** Andy Turner, Keith Drew, Edward Aves, Alice Park, Lucy White, Jo Kirby, James Smart, Natasha Foges, James Rice, Emma Beatson, Emma Gibbs, Kathryn Lane, Monica Woods, Mani Ramaswamy, Harry Wilson, Lucy Cowie, Alison Roberts, Lara Kavanagh, Eleanor Aldridge, Ian Blenkinsop, Lorna North, Joe Staines, Matthew Milton, Tracy Hopkins; **Delhi** Madhavi Singh, Jalpreen Kaur Chhatwal, Dipika Dasgupta
Design & Pictures: **London** Scott Stickland, Dan May, Diana Jarvis, Nicole Newman, Rhiannon Furbear; **Delhi** Umesh Aggarwal, Jessica Subramanian, Ankur Guha, Pradeep Thapliyal, Sachin Tanwar, Anita Singh, Nikhil Agarwal, Sachin Gupta
Production: Liz Cherry, Louise Minihane, Erika Pepe
Cartography: **London** Ed Wright, Katie Lloyd-Jones; **Delhi** Ashutosh Bharti, Rajesh Mishra, Animesh Pathak, Jasbir Sandhu, Swati Handoo, Deshpal Dabas, Lokamata Sahu
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Digital Travel Publisher: Peter Buckley
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Operations Coordinator: Becky Doyle
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Help us update

We've gone to a lot of effort to ensure that the fifth edition of **The Rough Guide to The Dominican Republic** is accurate and up-to-date. However, things change – places get "discovered", opening hours are notoriously fickle, restaurants and rooms raise prices or lower standards. If you feel we've got it wrong or left something out, we'd like to know, and if you can remember the address, the price, the hours, the phone number, so much the better.

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Map symbols

maps are listed in the full index using coloured text

━ ▪ ━ ▪	National boundary	✈	Major airport
– – –	Chapter division boundary	✈	Municipal airport
1	Highway	★	Public transport stop
═	Main road	P	Parking
═	Secondary road	☉	Statue
—	Unpaved road (regional maps)	◉	Hotel
┄	Unpaved road (town maps)	⊞	Hospital
▬	Pedestrianized road	⛽	Fuel station
- - - -	Footpath	ⓘ	Information centre
━	Wall	✉	Post office
─	River	@	Internet access
— —	Ferry route	✳	Lighthouse
▲	Mountain peak	♦	General point of interest
≀	Waterfall	†	Church (regional maps)
◓	Cave	🟧	Building
∴	Ruins	✝	Church (town maps)
✡	Synagogue	†	Cemetery
🏛	Stately home	▨	Park
🏛	Monument	⁘	Beach
♜	Fortress	⩊	Swamps/marshes

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About the author

Sean Harvey was born in Kentucky, raised in Chicago and lives in New York City. He spent several years travelling as a freelance musician. He first visited the island of Hispaniola in 1990, during which he taught music in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, travelled extensively throughout the Dominican Republic and cultivated a lifelong addiction to the island and its people.

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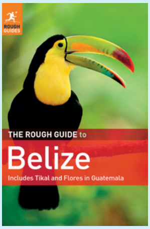
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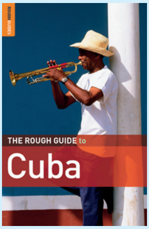
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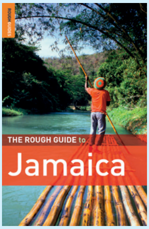
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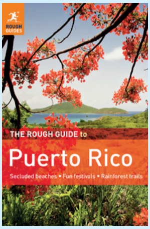
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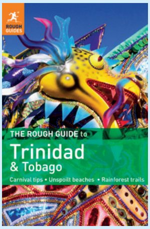
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Accommodation price codes

All the accommodation listed in this book has been categorized according to the following price codes. For full details, see p.25.

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② US$16-25
③ US$26-35
④ US$36-50
⑤ US$51-75
⑥ US$76-100
⑦ US$101-150
⑧ US$151 and over

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